



MAFIA

& Gold Digger

ISA OLIVER

A MAFIA ROMANCE - MARCHIANO & PETROV MAFIA ROMANCE SERIES

MAFIA AND GOLD DIGGER

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For all the girlies who want a mafia hitman to say to her...

“You're not used to a man having his face down here? From now on, you better get used to it. Because this is a view I'll kill for...”

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hi Lovely, please note that this book is a **mafia-lite romance**. Although there is a background mafia plot, the main focus is on the romance.

All books in the series are interconnected **standalones**. They can be read in any order.

I also just want to say a huge thank you to everyone who has helped me in this crazy journey—you know who you are! Also, a big shout out and thank you from the bottom of my heart to the S7 Group. You guys are the loveliest, most genuine people ever, and I truly appreciate you, your support, and your friendship. Can't wait to see what the year brings for you all, and I will be right here, cheering you on!!! Xxx

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SPOILERS - CONTENT NOTE

Topics referred to include the following. Please reach out if you need help. Your mental and physical health matter very much xxx

Mafia violence and death; hero with past trauma; cheating by a side character; attempted s*xual assault by side character; physical violence and threatened s*xual violence from side character toward heroine and her sibling; offensive comments toward heroine regarding her weight, reputation, and family history (comments not from the hero); unplanned pregnancy; OCD; heroine with stealing issues.

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FACEBOOK GROUP AND ARCS

Facebook Group: 'Isa's Angels & Mafia Books'
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1409806332760996>

Would you like to receive a free 'Advance Reader Copy' of Isa's next release before anyone else? Please see here:

<https://isaoliverauthor.com/free-arcs/>

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FAMILIES

Veneti Family: Imperiosi Mafia, New York

Christian Veneti (Capo)
Saint Veneti – Christian's cousin
Nicki Veneti – Christian's cousin
Ma Veneti – Christian's mom
Leoluca Veneti – Christian's brother
Anni Marchiano – Christian's sister
Fidella DeCarlo – Christian's sister
Jacquetta DeCarlo – Christian's niece
Quin DeCarlo – Christian's nephew

Fiorelli Family

Emerald Fiorelli
Milena Fiorelli – Emerald's sister
Jaspar Fiorelli – Emerald's brother
Giulietta Fiorelli – Emerald's sister
Ariana Fiorelli – Emerald's mom

Others

Ronnie Mainetto – made man
Calcedonio Cicconi – underboss
Carmine Cicconi – underboss
Armando Barbieri – captain
Lorenzo Marchiano – Anni's husband

Marco Marchiano – Lorenzo's cousin

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CHAPTER ONE

EMERALD

My mind is reeling and racing like an out-of-control rollercoaster. The letter taped to the door of our apartment this morning flashes in my head. And the big, bold lettering, stark against the bright white paper, is etched into my mind.

The air conditioning in the back office feels as frigid as an arctic wind whipping around me. Or maybe it's *fear* that's icing my veins...

Fear of what that piece of paper means.

And fear of what I'm about to get myself into right now.

"You sure you want to run guns for us, Emerald?"

Terror. Panic. Desperation. They all rush through me like rolling tidal waves, threatening to drown me under their sheer weight. *No. No, I don't want to do this. But he doesn't need to know that.* "Sure. Of course." The words trip off my tongue as I cross my fingers behind my back.

Ronnie Mainetto, my boyfriend, slides his gaze over me. "Is something wrong?"

Doubt creeps into his expression, and my stomach tightens. I paste a sunny smile onto my face and force some false brightness into my voice. Because if I smile, if I pretend everything's okay, then maybe it will be. "Everything's totally fine. I just want a little more spending money."

While we speak, I keep snapping the clasp on my bracelet open and shut. My heart pumps loudly in my ears like a drummer thumping out a

beat. I don't know how else I'm going to make rent this month. My mom won't be able to come up with the money. She's the reason we're in this mess. And the only thing I'm certain of right now is that I have to keep a roof over the heads of my three younger siblings. I'm eighteen, and I never imagined I would have the burden of this sort of responsibility, but there's no way in hell I'm going to let my siblings down—ever.

I hate to even ask Ronnie. To be vulnerable like this. Relying on others for a handout. That's what others will say if they find out about this. But I push that information from my mind. It doesn't matter what they think. Not right now. *Just keep smiling, Em. Just keep hoping that everything's going to be okay.*

My palms are clammy as I continue playing with the cool metal clasp. *Open, shut, open, shut*, trying to calm my shredded nerves with the soothing sound of the clicks.

"I mean, we don't really have much going on. Some courier work, but that's kind of low-level stuff."

"I'll do it," I say quickly before he can take the offer back. I clear my throat trying to push off the desperation dripping from my voice. "I mean, I don't mind if it's something like that. What do I have to do?"

He relaxes in the chair in his office at the back of the restaurant. "We'll give you the details. You drop the guns off and take the cash at the location. When you get back here with the money, we'll pay you a cut of it."

It doesn't sound like the hardest thing in the world. And yet how many stories of runners and couriers getting picked up by the cops swirl around the casino on an all too regular basis? The very real fear of being caught chokes me like a serial killer has his hands wrapped around my neck. Still, I keep my face neutral. "Sure. I can do that."

I hope.

Ronnie hums before he takes a sip of his whiskey. "Okay. It's yours. I'll let the boys know."

"Thanks, Ronnie." I try not to let my body sag with relief because this is only half the battle. I'm not stupid enough to think that this is going to be as easy as he makes it sound.

"No problem, Em." He's only half paying attention now, his gaze fixed on a message that's lit up his phone. He doesn't look happy. "I'll be back in a minute, okay, doll?"

I watch Ronnie talking in hushed tones with a couple of his guys who are standing just outside the office door. They're talking business, and I know I've overstayed my welcome now.

I give Ronnie another smile as I squeeze past him, and with a slight nod of his head, he acknowledges I'm leaving and says that he'll call me later about the job.

* * *

I triple check my phone for the address, the bright screen illuminating my face.

It's dark and overcast today, making the fact that I'm wearing sunglasses a little weird. But the thought of not wearing them just doesn't sit well with me.

It's just a run-of-the-mill gun drop. A typical swap. Teens younger than I am do this stuff all the time.

I can do it.

And yet my heart's racing in my chest, my palms sweaty as I swipe them against the front of my jeans. If I mess this up, that's it. I can kiss the crumbling roof over our heads goodbye, and the warm meals for the kids will be out the window. Gone in a poof of smoke.

Eviction.

The word is a big neon sign flashing in my head.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I can do this. I *have* to do this. There's no other option. The money I'm getting from this is enough to prevent homelessness for the next month. And losing our home is not a reality I'm willing to put my siblings through. They deserve so much more, and I'm going to make damn sure I give it to them.

We never stood a chance with a liar for a father. One thing's for sure; I'll *never* fall for a man who lies. I've seen firsthand the damage and irreparable fallout that lies cause. They can never serve as a solid foundation for anything good—because lies are nothing but flimsy pillars that'll always cause the volatile elements in your life to come tumbling down like a collapsing house of cards.

My hand squeezes into a fist around the strap of my bag, and I take another steadying breath before walking again.

Twenty minutes ago in Ronnie's office, I'd been given the bag, heavy with the weapons inside. Together with an address, a time, and a warning not to get fucking caught.

I lick my lips. I'm two streets away from the location. And then I see a cop car.

Oh God.

Swallowing against the knot in my throat, I try to look nonchalant. I don't hurry my step despite all the warnings screaming inside my head.

My pulse thrashes against my neck. My grip on the bag tightens, fingers slick with sweat.

The cruiser inches closer. Its tires crunch against the road. And it crawls to a stop beside me.

A shadow moves inside.

Then—*whoop!* The siren blares.

Every muscle in my body locks.

Please, no...

The cops rush out of their car.

I screw my eyes shut.

"You're under arrest!"

And I feel the *whoosh* of cold air as they rush toward me.

Cringing, I wait for their hands to grab me.

And wait some more...

Before cracking one eyelid open a millimeter.

And darting a feverish glance around myself, I see a kid in a dark hoodie a few steps away who's being cuffed.

My mouth drops open.

I snap it shut again and drop my gaze to the ground just in case they see me gawking and start to get curious.

I'm just an innocent bystander. Okay, maybe not so innocent. But I'm not the one they're after today.

I yank my hood down quickly to blend in with the other bodies milling about the place. People all on their way to goodness knows where. But as far as the cops are concerned, I'm just another black-haired girl in a sea of ravens, brunettes, and blonds.

As I hurry on, I can't help my eyes darting back to the officers, my hand tightening on the bag as I hold it to my side. What's the charge for carrying

weapons without a permit? The stolen, illegal kind of guns. I don't know the answer to that, and I'm sure as hell not about to find out.

Being arrested right now is the last thing I can cope with. My siblings count on me, and spending a night in holding or worse is just not part of the plan. With a shaky breath, I relax my body. *Focus, Em.*

I arrive at the location. Skidding to a halt, I watch wide-eyed as two more cops stand outside the door I'm supposed to be dropping at.

Crap.

I duck back into the shadows on the opposite side of the street as I watch a man, a muscled guy in a wife beater, chat with the officers. Carlito. His gaze is darting around looking for someone. *For me.*

Okay, Emerald. You can do this. Just got to find a new way to deliver the goods.

Waiting for the police to leave isn't an option. They linger after they question people, especially when it's something to do with dodgy guys like Carlito.

I drag a hand through my hair. *It's going to be fine. It's got to be fine.* Because if I get caught, there'll be no one to watch the kids. And then Child Protective Services will split us up, and the life I've been trying to build for us will disappear faster than a single blink of my emerald eyes.

And that's not happening. Not today. Failing this simple task isn't an option. I can hear the sea of whispers already if I have to slink back to Ronnie with the guns still in my possession. *Untrustworthy. Just like her father. Worthless. Useless.*

The words sting even in my mind. I dig my nails into my palms. I'm more than my father's daughter. And I'm not letting myself fail.

I stare at the location again. It's a typical row house. There's got to be a way around this. *Think, Em.* It's obvious they don't have a warrant, or they'd already be inside his house and turning it upside down.

If I can get in, swipe the money, and leave the guns, I'm scot-free. It'd be simple if it wasn't so goddamn risky.

I squint as I imagine all the moves in my mind, examining the situation like I would a chessboard.

All possible moves and endgames.

Looking at how I can keep control of this game.

Because that's the only way I can protect myself in this murky world...

And there it is.

The way I can get in.

There's an alley out back. That means squeezing between the small gap between the houses. But I'll do whatever it takes if it means I can complete the job.

I move out from the shadows and into the bodies that move up and down the sidewalk. I catch Carlito's eye as I pass on the opposite side of the street.

He gives a small tilt of his chin before narrowing his beady eyes to the officers.

My foot taps at the crosswalk, waiting for the hand to switch to the walking man. Three...Two...One...

I stay in step with the other bodies crossing the road. Nothing looks more suspicious than trying to race across the street when others are just moseying on by.

Approaching Carlito's house, I hold my breath as I duck into the gap between the buildings.

It's so narrow. My hoodie snags. I press the bag to my chest and shimmy through the passage, stopping to listen.

Nothing.

My lips purse. I can taste the sweat on my upper lip.

Then I hear one of the cops take one heavy step nearer, then another.

I plaster myself to the wall.

"Where are you going, pig?" Carlito's mocking voice floats toward me.

I wait a few moments, not even daring to breathe, before peeking around the corner.

The cop's back is to me now, heading back to where Carlito stands, hands on his hips.

I swallow the bile burning my throat and make my way into the back alley, careful not to make a single sound.

I edge the gate open, careful to lift the creaky latch only a centimeter at a time, cringing with every single squeak it makes.

The back door is open, giving me a view of the rundown interior. The planter box I need is just in reach.

Hurrying forward, I shove the bag into the box, snatch the envelope of cash taped to the top, run back out through the door, and hop the fence back into the alleyway.

Done! Thank God that it's done.

I pull my hoodie from my body, tying it around my waist. The moment I hit the main street again, the vise on my chest slightly lessens. My body sags as I make my way in the opposite direction from where I came. I just need to put distance between me and that mess back there.

Fishing my phone from my pocket, I send a thumbs up to Ronnie. His response is another thumbs up and an offer to meet back at his office. And just like that, the terror of facing the night on the streets vanishes.

For another month, at least.

The stress of the last few days is catching up with me.

I know I'm doing things that are wrong. Very wrong.

My life's a mess.

But I don't know how to make everything okay again.

* * *

The next day, I'm behind the bar at Casino Venice and about to start my shift. I finished high school a few weeks ago, and now, I try to pick up as many shifts here as I can. My whole life seems surreal to me. Up until last month, I was still juggling school and homework as well as working at the casino. Yeah, it's definitely surreal.

I'm glad to leave school behind. If only shaking off the past years could be that easy...

Addison, another bartender, sighs as she polishes a glass, a deep frown marring her features.

"Is everything okay, Addison?"

She gives me a quick smile. "Yeah."

"Aaron issues?" Aaron is her loser ex-husband.

"Is it that obvious?" she says with a grimace. "He was supposed to have the kids this weekend, but he says he can't now because his latest girlfriend apparently can't stand children. I'm supposed to be working on Saturday, and I've asked around, but no one can swap with me."

"Doesn't Janice owe you as you swapped a lot with her recently?"

"Yeah, she definitely owes me." She pulls a face. "But she said she has a mani-pedi planned *which she can't possibly cancel*, and then she's busy the rest of Saturday getting her cat Botox or some shit like that."

Christ, Janice really is awful. She takes advantage of Addison's kind nature, but she always wheedles out of returning all the favors. And I desperately hope that she isn't really subjecting her cat to Botox. I mean, what the heck? "I can swap with you," I tell Addison.

"I can't let you do that," she says quickly. "You already swapped with me this week, and you haven't had a Saturday off in ages."

"It's no problem. I've nothing planned anyway." I cross my fingers behind my back. I have a date on Saturday, and my heart dips a little because I was really looking forward to it, but Addison is a single mom, and her own mother can't help her out right now as she's recovering from a heart attack.

She hesitates. "Are you sure?"

"Of course," I say, squeezing her hand.

It's busy here, and I start to check through more glasses as Addison goes to collect fresh liquor bottles from the storeroom. She's back a minute later, carrying a tray of new bottles, and she calls over to me as she approaches. "Emerald, there's a call for you. It's your mom. She needs to speak to you."

All eyes swivel toward me, and my heart sinks in my hollow chest as I hear her words.

"Does your mom need help to give a double blowjob to her latest john?" Ria Gioberti sneers in her annoyingly nasal voice.

Addison shoots me a sympathetic look as snickers sound all around me.

Ria is the leader of the mean girls' clique who hang around the casino, trying to snare a rich mafia husband while passing the time by making my life hell. She made sure to insult me almost the entire time we were at school together, and it appears she's determined to carry on doing the same thing now.

I was never one of the cool girls at school, and that was totally fine by me because all I ever wanted was to blend into the background and stay off the radar of the gossips. I wish I was the sort of person who could just brush off comments like this, but the cackles of Ria and her cronies cause a wave of embarrassment to submerge me within its depths. I know that my mom is almost definitely calling me because she's wasted. She's drunk, or she's high, or she's both. And I can't risk saying anything back to Ria and causing a scene because I desperately need this job.

Ignoring the whispers around me, I walk toward the back area. Addison is also on her way back to the storeroom, and I trail slowly behind her. She,

along with just about everyone else, knows that my mom is an escort.

“I don’t think it’s anything to worry about, Em. Your mom says she’s feeling sick and needs you to come home.”

She’s sick. That means she’s as high as a kite. And she’s either locked herself out of the apartment, or she’s run out of alcohol, weed, and money.

I walk through the back lobby, noticing as always the marble checkerboard floor. *Black and white.*

It would be a lot easier if life was black or white. Right or wrong. Happy or sad. Sunshine or shadows...

But it isn’t. Because life—especially, my life—isn’t meant to be simple.

That’s why I prefer to play chess.

On the black and white board I got for my seventh birthday, I learned the letter and number of every square, a multitude of sequences, and a wealth of strategies. And on that board, I always know if I’m on the attack, on the defense, or just biding my time.

Wouldn’t life be easier if it was a set of predefined moves? Which if you followed them, would lead you to the outcome you desired?

Because in chess, the pieces follow rules and move in predictable patterns. But in real life, all you can do is make a move and pray it doesn’t end in checkmate.

Reaching the office, I check around me before slowly picking up the phone. “Mom?”

“Emerald? I need you... I’m sick,” she slurs.

She’s definitely wasted. I cringe inwardly, knowing that Addison will have heard her in this state.

“Okay, Mom. I’m on my way. Are you at home?”

I hear a sound like she’s just bumped into something. “But I can’t find my keys...” she wails.

“Just wait for me. I’ll be there soon, and I’ll let you in.”

For a long time now, I’ve felt like the parent and felt like I’ve got to take care of her.

I hate having to let work down, and I hate losing this shift because of the money. Even though I’ve got the money from the gun run, that’s mostly going toward the two months’ rent we owe and next month’s rent. I still need to earn money for utilities and food and all the other stuff.

Hurrying home, I arrive at our rundown building to find Mom slumped on the floor outside our apartment. “Come on, Mom,” I huff out as I haul

her to her feet.

I let her into the apartment with my key and help her stagger to her bedroom where she collapses onto the bed.

“He’s left me.” She starts to sob.

Oh God. She’s been dumped. And although the latest guy is yet another loser who she’ll be better off without, I still don’t want her to have to go through this pain.

“I’ll make you a coffee and bring it into you. It’ll make you feel better.” And it will help to sober her up. Because when she’s drunk, she also gets maudlin.

Heading to our tiny kitchen, I’m pouring the coffee when a knock at the door interrupts my thoughts.

I hope to God it’s not one of the neighbors wanting to complain—again—about my mom causing a disturbance when she couldn’t get into our apartment. Being wasted makes her curse and shout and scream. *A lot.*

I slowly open the front door to find a man holding a huge bouquet of flowers.

“Delivery for Emerald Fiorelli.”

“That’s me!” I beam a huge smile at the delivery guy, and he smiles back at me. That’s the great thing about smiles and laughter—they’re infectious and brighten up the whole day. Maybe that’s a silly thing to think, but with all my problems, I hold onto small things like this. Opening the door wider, my cheeks tinge with delight as my arms stretch out for the bouquet of deep pink roses and stargazer lilies he holds out to me. “Thank you so much!” Closing the door, I lean against it and admire the magnificent blooms, inhaling a lungful of their heady fragrance before checking the card.

The flowers are from Ronnie. They have to be a good sign. He wouldn’t be sending me flowers if I was worthless or irrelevant—if I was *unlovable*, right? Because people say things about my background all too often, and it always leaves me feeling like I’m not good enough...

I try to not think about the rumor I’ve heard. Because it’s just that. A rumor. Probably started by someone trying to stir up trouble for me. He wouldn’t cheat on me, right? If he did lie and cheat, I would ditch him so fast, but I’m pretty certain that he would never do something like that to me because as well as being my boyfriend, he’s also my best friend. After admiring the flowers again, I grab my cell and send him a text.

Emerald: The flowers are gorgeous. I love them.

Ronnie: Anything for you, baby. Aren't you still at work?

Emerald: Had to come home for a Mom emergency.

Ronnie: If you're free, we have a meeting in the back room at the casino at 5 p.m. and need another cocktail waitress?

Emerald: For sure! I need the extra work after having to drop today's shift. I'll see you there xxx

When my mom is like this, I know she'll fall asleep soon and sleep it off, leaving me free to work another shift. After putting the blooms in water and gazing at them one more time, I know I have to get a move on if I don't want to be late, but I decide to change my dress because I want to look my absolute best if I'm seeing Ronnie.

One of the things I like about working at Casino Venice is that staff can wear their own clothes as long as it fits the employee dress code of 'smart and stylish.'

My feet move on autopilot as I head for my closet. I stand before all the sparkly dresses in front of me, my gold-tipped nails running along the fabrics as I weigh my options. And my eyes rest on the security tags still attached...

It's something I hate about myself, and honestly, I'm deeply ashamed about it all and really wish I could stop. I've tried to stop so many times, and I know I have serious issues. I look at the dresses before me and think that if I'm in these shiny dresses, it allows me to look the part of being worth something and makes it a little bit easier to blend in despite everything that's happened. *Although that's not the real reason I have them...*

And I pick out one of my favorites—a gold dress that clings to my curves like a second skin and stops mid-thigh. Although it's not *gold* exactly because the sales ticket describes it as *Champagne Mist*. This dress, along with all the other ones I have in a similar shade, aren't plain gold. No, they're all called something more unique and special.

Stepping into the dress and zipping myself up, I get ready as quickly as I can, adding my work badge that says 'Casino Venice' in a curling gold script.

Running a hairbrush through my glossy black mane and adding a slick of mascara around my green eyes, I calculate in my head how much I'll earn this afternoon and how much closer it'll bring me to making this month's utilities and food bills.

Before I leave, I take the coffee into my mom's bedroom and leave it on her nightstand, where I know that it'll more than likely grow cold and be left untouched. But I'm not going to let my mom's issues spoil my mood today.

I take the train and climb the steps out of the station. I've never gotten anything on Valentine's Day before, and my good mood means I'm practically bouncing along in my black Balenciaga boots—a gift from Ronnie.

And I carry on in my little bubble of bliss, daydreaming and away in my own world.

Not realizing that I'm about to get stopped by the authorities.

And hauled down to the station.

Because I'm working for my mobster boyfriend's family...

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CHAPTER TWO

EMERALD

I smooth down my sparkly dress as I walk. People always ask me why I like the color gold so much. The answer's simple. It's because it reminds me of sunshine. Of happiness. And of staying positive. Because with all the issues in my life, if I can remain optimistic, then I definitely feel a little better about myself and everything else.

I'm lost in my thoughts when a black SUV appears to my right.

The first thing I notice is the silence. No screech of tires, no honk—just the nearly soundless glide of a vehicle sliding up beside me. Expensive. Predator-smooth. The kind of thing that doesn't need to make noise to be dangerous.

I try to glance at it out of the corner of my eye to see if I can make out who's in the car. But the tint on the windows is too dark.

The expensive engine stays practically silent in the still summer air as it creeps beside me. Goosebumps erupt on my arms. I walk quicker as the vehicle prowls along and matches my walking pace.

I keep my eyes straight ahead, but my heart hammers in my chest. Is someone stalking me? Or is it a cop looking to bust me? Or even worse, a Fed...?

These thoughts utterly terrify me.

My sweaty palm gently presses against my body to make sure that my dress is still all in place, cringing as my fingers meet hard plastic. The

security tag.

I spin on my heel and take a sharp left down a narrow side street.

But my stalker silently swings his SUV around the tight corner to follow me.

A window rolls down.

My heart leaps into my throat. And my head follows the smooth electric sound. And my eyes cut across to the dark-haired driver with piercing eyes.

Crap, this must be one of those cops Ronnie's always warning me about. Has Ronnie gotten arrested? Is this why this cop is here for me now? Crap, crap, crap!

"Emerald Fiorelli," his voice rumbles. The passenger door pushes open as he leans across, and a dark head ducks down on the driver's side to glower at me. "Get in."

I blink again before looking to my left and right.

"Me?" I squeak.

"You're Fiorelli, right?"

To lie or not. I flash him my best attempt at a smile. "Um, who's asking?"

"I don't have time for this. Get in the car, princess."

I can't stop my pert nose from wrinkling. "Princess? *Do I look like a Pomeranian?*" Jesus, does he expect me to sit pretty and bark on command as well?

His dark gaze continues to burn into me. "Get in."

"I don't think so..." I'm trying really hard not to show my full-blown panic. They can't just arrest you for refusing, can they? Or does it constitute obstruction of justice or something? Damn, if I'm going to date a made man, I really should pay more attention to those *Law & Order* reruns on TV.

I debate running.

"Don't even think about it. Get in the damn car, *Fiorelli*."

The way he says my last name sends a shiver skittering down my spine. "Ask nicely. Or you're going to have to make me if that's what you want." Oh gosh, why did I just say that?

"You *really* don't want me to do that."

"Scared that a girl will outrun you if you try?" Christ, I know I should really just stop speaking, but my brain and mouth seem to have lost all connection.

I can practically see him roll his tongue over his teeth in the darkness of the car's interior. "Get the hell in the car. You're just making this worse for yourself."

That threat gives me pause.

"Count of three, princess..."

And suddenly forgetting about the ridiculously high heels I'm wearing, I make a mad dash down the sidewalk.

My family already has a bad reputation. And I refuse to add *snitch* to the laundry list of sins on my family's name.

I hear a car door open and his heavy steps pounding behind me.

The man continues calling my name as I look over my shoulder to see him chasing me.

My arms flail as I almost trip and try to keep my balance. People on the sidewalk see what's happening but don't even try to intervene. Jesus, does no one on the anonymous streets of New York care that I might be in mortal danger? "*He's a serial killer!*" I squeal.

But no one pays a blind bit of notice. *What the heck?*

A thunder of footsteps. A rush of air. Steel fingers clamp onto my arm, yanking me backward. I slam into a wall of muscle, his grip unshakable.

Panic rips through me.

He manhandles me, twisting me around to face him. Annoyance laces the handsome face as I struggle against his grasp. But his grip doesn't budge as he bends his head, and his deep voice caresses my ear. "*Come with me.*"

"I didn't do anything," I blurt out as he forces me back toward the SUV.

"Oh yeah?" he drawls, marching me past a couple of looky-loos gawking at us. "Innocent people don't take off like that just from someone calling their name."

I'm trying hard not to be intimidated by the man who's towering above me. "You try being a woman walking alone when some random man confronts you. Let me go!"

But he doesn't, opening the car's back passenger door and pushing my struggling body inside.

The door slams. A soft click sounds. My hand flies to the handle and jerks it hard. But it's locked.

He's definitely a cop.

Crap!

Oh God, I'm really in deep trouble now...

As he gets into the driver's seat, the SUV's interior feels too still and too quiet, the air thick with the scent of leather and something else...and it's the kind of scent that makes my pulse trip over itself.

He must be a detective because he's wearing dark jeans hugging his muscular legs, a black T-shirt, black boots, and a leather jacket. And despite the casualness of his clothing, each item looks immaculate and expensive. This definitely isn't a guy who slums it. Everything about him is casual and languid, yet purposeful and powerful at the same time.

He's well over six foot. At a guess, I'd say he's six foot three. But it's not just his height which is overwhelming me. It's everything about him—because more danger rolls off him than should be allowed for any mortal man.

Panic hurtles through my mind at the speed of a sickening rollercoaster.

Ronnie will send a lawyer for me when I get to make my one phone call, right?

And am I under arrest already?

If I am, what have I been arrested for? A bead of sweat rolls down my back. Have they found out about some of the things I've done? That I've been a gun-runner? Or am I under arrest for having a mobster as a boyfriend? Or for working in a casino that launders dirty money? I hadn't actually been working when I'd been stopped—I'd just been on my way to work. But I *am* wearing the casino's employee badge...

Ronnie's warned me often enough that my connection to him means that the cops might try to get to me and make me talk one day.

My scholarship to St. Savior's School means that as well as receiving the best education money can buy, I also have the privilege of hanging around with the kids from the local mafia family. And that's where I met Ronnie Mainetto.

He's part of the Imperiosi mafia here in New York, the organization that rules the shadowy underbelly of the city with a fist of iron and their own brand of dubious morals.

And today, the cops have decided to zero in on me because I'm connected to a guy who's at the heart of the organization. Ronnie says it's what they always do, trying to find a weak link, someone who'll talk to them and give them juicy morsels of information. But I'm *not* a weak link.

I start worrying about when I'm going to get my phone call so that I can call Ronnie for help.

My eyes dart to the cop driving the car. His hair is perfectly mussed up and it's as black as the leather jacket he's wearing, and I can see ink creeping from his collar and escaping up the side of his neck. He actually has half-decent dress sense—for a cop.

"Um, excuse me? I know I'm supposed to get my phone call when we get to the station, but how about we just save some time? Because I'm kind of in a rush and need to get to work please." I don't know why I'm being so polite. "You can lend me your cell, and I can make the call right now, okay? Um, please?"

His dark eyes swivel to mine in the rear-view mirror.

My breath sticks in my throat as his stare burns into me.

He doesn't say a single word...

I'm the first to break eye contact, not able to stop a flush running up my cheeks and not wanting to look at him as that happens.

How did he even know who I was and where to find me? "Why are you stalking me?" I grit out, trying to keep my voice strong.

He gives a soft scoff. "You must think very highly of yourself to think that I'm stalking you."

As I watch the city speed by outside the window, I start worrying about how long it'll be until I can call for help.

When I can't stand the same thoughts going around my head yet again like a never-ending merry-go-round, I try to distract myself by switching to worrying about how I'm going to pay this month's bills. What my mom brings in isn't enough to keep us afloat; it hasn't been for a long time now. She calls herself an escort—she's basically a high-end hooker. And her career choice doesn't pay particularly well, especially when she's too wasted to work a lot of the time. And sitting here in the back of this cop's car means that I'm not going to get paid for this extra shift.

Everything about my life has been a disaster since my dad was killed. He was a made man—until he decided to steal from his bosses and ended up being executed and fed to the fishes in the Hudson River. He paid the price with his life, while my family was practically cast out of the Imperiosi and left to fend for ourselves.

I was really lucky that I was able to stay on at my private high school after winning a scholarship. But apart from school, everything else changed

overnight. We moved from our comfortable and spacious house and eventually ended up in a cramped apartment in a crumbling building. And money became a constant worry.

I try to make myself feel better about the money by deciding that as soon as I get out of here, I'll ask Ronnie if they need any extra staff for the rest of the week. That is, if I make it out of here. Because despite trying to keep my mind from thinking the worst, panic stabs at my body.

I find myself pressing back against the seat. I hate being in this confined space with this man. His body seems too big for the space, and his scent surrounds me—a mixture of spicy and smoky.

Growing up, it's always been made abundantly clear to me that you stay the hell away from the cops. They're all friends with each other and look down on the rest of us who aren't members of their special little club, especially people like me who've practically grown up among the mafia. All my life, I've been told that cops are slimy and creepy and they're like insects you want to swat away from your skin.

Although, somehow, this guy seems different—smooth, immaculate, *cold*.

He parks his car on a random street with no cop station in sight. Getting out, he snatches open the back door, grasps my arm, and hauls me onto the sidewalk.

"If you wanted me to get out, you could have *just asked*," I mutter, trying in vain to shake his hand off me while at the same time attempting to pull down the skirt of my short dress.

He leads me down the street.

"Where are we going?" I'm proud of myself for making my voice sound bored despite the anxiety galloping through me.

"You'll see," is his infuriatingly short answer.

He catches my eye, and I shoot a scowl at him. But he ignores my glacial glare, instead trailing his eyes down my body. "Nice dress." He lets his gaze linger over my legs. "*Stolen, I presume?*"

I hesitate for a millisecond. "Of course, um, it isn't."

"You're a terrible liar," he drawls in an irritatingly casual voice. "You should always just plead the fifth."

"Huh?"

"You know, your constitutional right to refuse to answer so as not to incriminate yourself. Don't they teach you anything at school these days?"

“Funnily enough,” I reply airily, “the sorts of schools frequented by mafia families aren’t big on learning the niceties of American life.” I obviously know what the fifth amendment is, but I’m determined to make him think about something else than the fact that my dress is stolen. He knows my full name, which means he’ll have already looked up all my details, and having a Fiorelli as a father and an Imperiosi made man as a boyfriend makes it pointless for me to even try to deny my connections to the mafia.

He shakes his head at me. His hand almost touching my back is hot, and I tell myself that the shiver down my spine is just because of the whip of cold air that suddenly whirls around us—it has nothing to do with the man escorting me like I’m some perp being carted down the cellblock.

Slowing down, he stops outside a coffee shop which is sandwiched between a bakery and a small grocery store.

“I thought we were going to the station. Why have you brought me here?”

“I need a coffee.”

I gawk at him. “Seriously? You kidnap me, and now we’re on a Starbucks run?” *Christ, can’t he get caffeinated on his own time?*

“Not Starbucks,” he corrects smoothly, pulling open the door. “I have standards.”

I hesitate at the door, looking longingly at the park across the street. I can see the old guys sitting at the wooden tables and chairs, their heads bent over their chessboards. I never get the time to play at the park anymore. Either I’m working, looking after my mom, or looking after my siblings and trying to give them a decent upbringing. When I’d been younger though, my dad had brought me to the park often, and we’d play against the old guys.

That was when he’d still been here. I can’t help my mind wandering back to when he died. My mom hadn’t worked a day in her life. I’d begged her to get a normal job, like in a store or something. But no one wanted to give a job to a woman with the last name Fiorelli...

“You play?” His voice interrupts my thoughts.

“Yeah,” I reply in a wistful voice.

“Who taught you?”

“My dad.” I clamp my lips shut. Why on earth did I just tell him that? I shouldn’t reveal a single thing about myself. This is how they get you to

talk. By asking casual questions, by pretending they're your friend. And before you know it, you've mentioned something you shouldn't have. An innocent detail you think is harmless but which they fit into their bigger jigsaw puzzle of information gathering. "What about you—can you play chess?" I quickly try to shift the focus away from me.

"I don't play," he clips.

I follow him into the coffee shop and gaze around myself. The place looks like it hasn't changed since the 1950s and oozes a retro charm. A sprinkling of customers are ensconced in the cozy booths with red leather seats, and a big glass counter shows off an assortment of tempting cakes and ice creams, reminding me that I haven't eaten in a while. The coffee machine is gleaming in the background as it hisses away, filling the air with a heavenly aroma, and there's even an old-fashioned soda fountain.

"Hey, Melissa." He greets the woman behind the counter.

"Happy birthday, handsome," she practically purrs at him, pulling out from under the cash register what looks to be an envelope containing a birthday card.

"You shouldn't have. You spoil me, Melissa."

"As if I'd forget," she simpers.

As we stand in front of the counter, another woman, wearing the same café uniform, saunters past. She bats her eyelashes at him. "Hey, birthday boy!" she calls in a husky voice.

I can't stop myself from rolling my eyes. With his god-like looks, he's obviously the precinct's pin-up boy. All the women in here are drooling over him and not even bothering to hide it. Jeez, is every woman in the café a part of this cop's birthday appreciation society?

"Coffee and cannoli for both of us," he says to Melissa before sweeping his dark gaze across to me. "This place has the best cannoli in the city. You ever been here before?"

I shake my head, fiddling with my bracelet.

"And their ice cream is the best I've ever tasted. They make everything from scratch, using their family recipes."

"I'll bring them over," Melissa says with a coquettish smile at him.

He leads me over to a table, and he indicates with a jerk of his head for me to sit. I'm obviously not important enough to waste his words on.

Everything about my interaction with this man is making a strange sensation prickles over me. I start to wonder if he is actually a cop. But I

shake my head. He chased after me, threw me in the back of his car, and locked the doors. He's definitely a cop. Why else would he have come after me?

Once we're both seated, I press my lips together so that I don't say anything. I know that silence is a cop tactic to get someone talking. People's natural inclination is to talk to fill the uncomfortable void, but that's not going to be me today. Nuh-uh.

He leans back in his chair. "How old are you, Emerald?" he demands. Jesus, everything about him is so bossy.

I sniff. "It's not polite to ask a woman her age." But his stare on me makes me uncomfortable, so I can't help but answer. "I'm, um, eighteen."

"Ah."

I frown at his response. "Ah? What's that supposed to mean?" I have no idea why his tone sounds offensive, almost as if my age explains something in his head.

"Just an observation," he murmurs.

"Of?"

"Nothing of importance."

There's more silence as he stares at me. "How old are you?" I shoot back.

"Twenty-nine. And I'm old enough to know that you're being used, Emerald."

My spine stiffens at his tone. "What's *your* name?" I'm determined to deflect the conversation. And me not knowing his name when he knows mine makes me feel at a distinct disadvantage.

"You can call me Saint."

I can't help the unladylike snort which escapes me. "I don't think your mama christened you Saint. What's your real name?"

He taps a finger on the tabletop. "You're supposed to be a smart girl. Work it out."

I huff to myself. Everything about this man is infuriating. And scary. I just want out of here. But I've got no idea when he's going to let me go.

Melissa interrupts our conversation, bringing over two small plates with cannoli and two coffees.

She also sets a dessert glass down in front of Saint. And in it is a triple scoop of chocolate ice cream with five lit candles set into the scoops. "Happy birthday!" she trills.

Christ, is the entire female population of New York in love with this man?

“Thanks, Melissa. Really sweet of you to remember. And my favorite flavor too.”

I feel like pointing out that the candles are making the ice cream melt rapidly, but I keep my thoughts to myself. I don’t want to engage in any more conversation with this man than is strictly necessary.

He spoons one of the scoops—with one of the candles—onto my cannoli plate. “You have to try this chocolate ice cream.” Yeah, like that’s my current priority.

He goes to blow out his remaining four candles.

“Wait!” I blurt out.

He pauses, gazing up at me with a raised brow.

“You haven’t made a wish,” I say softly.

He looks at me carefully. “You believe in that, do you? Wishes coming true?”

I shrug, feigning a casualness I don’t feel. “It’s a tradition. Everyone does it.” And with the life I’ve had so far, I never give up the chance of making a wish or being blessed with good luck, always crossing my fingers, not walking under ladders, and even praying to God when I’m really desperate.

He looks thoughtfully at the candles for a few moments before blowing them all out in one go. I wonder what he’s wished for. But I don’t ask. Because everyone knows that then it won’t come true.

He nods at my scoop. “You should blow out your candle too.”

I feel like refusing, but I can’t resist the temptation of getting a wish. And closing my eyes for a moment, I make my wish and blow out the candle.

He smirks at me. “Bet I can guess what you wished for, Emerald.”

“*That you shut up?*” Fear makes my manners totally fail me.

His lips flatten.

“Do you have no one to celebrate your birthday with? Is that why you’ve brought me here against my will to have ice cream with you?”

He doesn’t rise to the bait. “Got a boyfriend?”

“Jesus is my boyfriend.” I give him my most angelic expression. I’d rather he thinks I’m a bible-bashing nun than actually admit out aloud to him that I’ve got a mobster for a boyfriend.

“Any hobbies, princess?”

“Not really. I’ve always been busy working and with school before that.”

“A goody-two-shoes, then?”

God, this man is as annoying as he’s attractive. “Do I look like a goody-two-shoes to you?”

The way his eyes roam over my body makes my entire body tingle. He oozes power, confidence, authority. But it’s not something that I should find attractive, especially not from a cop.

The sound of his phone ringing splits the air. He takes it out of his pocket to glance at the screen.

“No please, don’t mind me,” I say with a casual flick of my wrist, although I’m praying he answers his phone just so that I can get a break from all the questions.

But his dark eyes flicker back to me as he rejects the call. *Just great.*

“What I really want to know is why does Ronnie make his girl work in the Imperiosi casino?”

Oh God. He already knows who my boyfriend is. “He doesn’t make me do anything,” I grit out. “I make my own decisions and make my own money.”

“He’s rich enough to buy you anything you want.”

I keep quiet. It isn’t about what I *want*. It’s about what I *need*. Money for rent, food, and bills.

“And you’re pretty enough to get whatever you want out of him.”

My pulse starts racing. Does he know that I’m called *the Fiorelli whore*—that because my mom’s a hooker, everyone likes to speculate that I’m one too?

“Are you hoping that he’ll marry you?”

“No.” *Yes.*

“Because he won’t, you know.”

“I don’t care.” *Yes, I do. A lot.*

“You know you can do better than Ronnie Mainetto.”

I don’t answer. Being the Fiorelli whore wildly limits my options. Anyway, I’m in love with Ronnie.

“You probably think you’re in love with him.”

Holy crap, how does he know what I’m thinking?

“But he doesn’t love you,” he clips.

And that's like an arrow to my heart.

This arrogant man can't possibly know if Ronnie loves me or not. But the irrational part of me wonders if he's heard something. I mean, why would Ronnie love *someone like me*?

"Does he make you deliver guns?"

"He doesn't *make* me do anything."

"So, you're delivering guns for the Imperiosi." It's a statement of fact, not a question.

I curse inwardly. "I, er, didn't say that."

"You didn't need to. I already know the answer."

"So, why are you asking me?" My voice rises as irritation races through me.

"Because I can. Does he make you sell your body too?"

"What?" I blurt out.

He leans forward and places his elbows on the table. His proximity makes me suddenly feel too hot. "You know, to make even more money out of you?"

"He doesn't force me to do *anything* to make money for himself." My words hurl through the air. Some of the girls at the casino sleep with the clientele for money, but I'm not one of them. If he's trying to unsettle me, then he's succeeded. Is this where in the conversation he tries to trip me up and attempts to make me reveal some information about the Imperiosi?

To my surprise, however, he sits back in his chair and focuses on eating his cannoli. "You should eat. It's good."

I want to refuse, but I'm hungry. I quickly scoop up the cannoli, savoring the sweet, creamy flavor of every mouthful. The fried pastry dough is topped with chopped pistachios, candied fruit, and chocolate chips, all sprinkled liberally with sugar, and the heavenly combination melts on my tongue.

I'm still hungry, and I start on my ice cream, as does he. And when I swallow the last mouthful, I look up into his gaze.

"Finished?" he asks.

I give a small nod.

He stands up, and grasping my arm again, he leads me out of the coffee shop and across the street.

I can feel the heat of each one of his fingers burning through my thin sleeve. "Where are we going?" Unease sears the edges of my voice. This

isn't the way back to his car.

"To the park."

"For what?"

"For you to play a game of chess."

"*Wait, what?*"

"I want to see you play. See if you're good for something other than working for drug pushers and gun sellers."

I suck in a breath. This man really knows how to get a girl's back up. "Maybe I don't want to play."

"Of course you do. One game."

"No, thanks."

His voice hardens. "Either let me watch you play one game and then I'll let you go, or we can continue our discussion but this time without the ice cream and pleasantries."

I swallow down the agitation crawling up my throat. "If I play, you'll let me go?" I really want to avoid the cop station if I can.

He nods his assent. I'm not sure if he's even telling the truth or what he's up to, but I'll take a game of chess any day over more questioning from him.

"Are you free for a game?" I ask a man with a gray beard and a woolen hat pulled down over his ears. It can get cold sitting out here when the sun goes behind the clouds.

"Sure, missy," he says with a twinkly smile revealing his crooked teeth.

I make a plan to lose the game in super quick time. That way I can get out of here and far away from this cop.

Once I start moving the pieces though, the lure of the game is too great, and I find myself playing for real.

My mom always said I was too pretty to play a dull game like chess. But the truth is I find the game utterly intoxicating. It's like a drug I can't get enough of. It's an elusive high that I'm always chasing and I never want to stop feeling. It's a battle where I can compete on a level playing field, where my reputation or past deeds don't affect my chance of success.

I open with the Queen's Gambit, one of my favorite openings because of the fight to control the center and the way it puts immediate pressure on Black.

White pawn to c4.

Black pawn to e6.

White knight to f3.

Black pawn to d5.

White pawn to d4.

Black knight to f6...

The entire time, Saint watches me like a predator stalking its prey. Surely, he must find this boring. It's probably another twisted ploy, just like the ice cream, to make him seem like a nice guy who's trying to be my friend.

But I become so engrossed in the game that I don't notice forty minutes have flown by. I've even stopped noticing Saint's stare upon me. Because all I care about is the black and white carved pieces in front of me. Each piece has its own history and its own destiny, but all of it is guided by the rules that define its moves.

Eventually, the old guy tips over his king, conceding the game with a chuckle. "You're good, missy. Best game I've played all week."

I stand up, beam him a smile, and thank him for the game. "Thanks for the game. I really appreciate it."

Walking away, I turn to Saint. "I'm free to go now?" I ask in an icy tone.

"Yeah. But I'll drive you to where you were headed. Casino Venice, right?"

"I'm fine," I say curtly.

But without another word, he grasps my arm tightly and pulls me to his car, pushing me into the front passenger seat this time. He gets into the driver's seat and takes me to the casino without another word.

Arriving at our destination and pulling into the casino parking lot, he leans over my body, crowding my space with his smoky cologne as he pushes the door open.

"A gentleman would come around and open my door for me," I point out.

"Yeah, well, I'm not a gentleman. *And don't ever forget that.*" This man is utterly confusing. I open my mouth to say something, but he carries on speaking before I can get anything out. "Get out, princess."

"What?"

"Get out."

"Aren't you supposed to have manners or something?"

"Get out before I shove you out. Better?"

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.”

My eyes narrow, and I unbuckle my belt. And stepping out of his car, I stride away as fast as I can, without a single backward glance.

* * *

As soon as I rush through the staff entrance, I run straight into Ronnie. “Oh God, I got stopped by a cop. But I didn’t tell him anything, I swear—”

“Hey, calm down, Em.” Ronnie pulls me into his arms, kissing me long and hard on the lips, and he doesn’t look the slightest bit ruffled by what I’ve just said. Pulling back after a few seconds, he smiles at me. “We already know what happened.”

My brows pucker into a deep frown. “You do?”

“Yeah. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Um, well, I’m not sure if I was arrested or not, but he didn’t charge me with anything, and I didn’t tell him anything about—”

“It’s okay, Em,” Ronnie soothes. “Relax. It’s all been handled.”

I stare at him. “It has?” I was convinced that I’d be in trouble for just getting stopped and that I’d have to plead with Ronnie and the Imperiosi to believe me when I said that I’d kept my mouth shut. “But who told you?”

“Our guy.”

For a moment, I’m utterly confused. “Do you mean...the cop is your guy?”

“A fucking cop got to you?” Christian Veneti walks up behind me. He’s the Capo of the Imperiosi since taking over the position from his father. Christian’s eyes narrow as they laser into me.

Even though I’ve always got on well with him, I’m still terrified that he might think that I revealed sensitive information. Although I might seem outwardly confident, the real me is a deep well of self-doubt and anxiety. “I didn’t tell him anything. It was just a cop that I ran into—”

“It was just Saint. He got to her first,” Ronnie says casually.

“Saint?” I interrupt. “You’re on first name terms with the cop?”

“Ah, I see.” Christian relaxes a fraction. “No, he’s not a cop. He’s one of our cousins. Third or fourth cousin, or something like that.” He waves his hand in a vague manner. “I’ve lost count. We asked him to pick you up to

keep you away from any Feds. We thought the Feds might get a warrant and be about to raid the casino. But our contact messaged half an hour ago to say the judge refused to issue the warrant due to insufficient evidence, so I texted Saint to tell him it was okay for him to drop you off here.”

Wait, what? Saint is their freaking cousin?

“But he didn’t tell me that he was one of you. I thought that he was a cop. I thought he was going to arrest me. He was interrogating me, asking me all sorts of questions...”

“Yeah, that sounds like Saint.” Christian chuckles. “Evil motherfucker. He was just playing with you. He’s our hitman. He usually works out of Philadelphia, although he’s been working for us in Italy lately.”

I open my mouth but then close it. I can’t believe he put me through that. Scaring me to death and asking all those questions. *Invasive questions...*

I wonder what Ronnie would think if he knew Saint said that I could do better than him for a boyfriend? Although the rational part of me knows not to stir the pot. Made men are volatile, emotional, and violent. And I don’t want to cause any problems between Ronnie and his fellow made men.

And it’s not like I’ll see Saint ever again.

CHAPTER THREE

S AINT

Christ, it was almost as hard to get her out of my car as it was to get her in it in the first place.

I watch as Emerald hurries into the casino and straight into the arms of Ronnie Mainetto. And through the door that remains ajar, I watch her boyfriend embrace her and kiss her long and hard.

When I see this, something tightens in my chest, sharp and unexpected. But I shove it down, and closing my eyes, my grip tightens on the steering wheel.

Eighteen. Fuck, she's young. Too young to be mixed up in all this shit. But I shouldn't be surprised given how most of us get started in it all.

I was born into the Veneti Family, which means I was born into the Imperiosi mafia. And working as their hitman is the only thing that keeps me fucking sane.

But Emerald Fiorelli... She had a delicious defiant tilt to her chin, and I'm not going to lie, it did something to me. And watching her silently fume in the seat beside me during the drive gave me a new kind of thrill.

And I can't help my mind wandering back to the reason I met a girl in a stolen gold dress today...

TWO DAYS EARLIER

A painful memory flits through my head, but I shove the thought into that black box in my mind. Ramming it as deep and as far down as I can.

A heavy exhale leaves my nostrils as I settle on the rooftop.

No distractions. No relationships. No feelings.

Those are the three rules I live by. Distractions are for weak men. Relationships make you sloppy. And feelings turn you into a fucking fool.

I do none of them. How many men have I had to off because they involved themselves with the wrong woman? Or worse, because they let their emotions cloud their judgment so that they do stupid shit like Romanelli here did? Not me. That bullshit is just asking for trouble.

My eyes focus back on the image through my binoculars, watching the target in his house from the empty property opposite. Empty because I killed off the owner a few hours ago.

I spare a glance down at my watch. Five minutes and forty-two seconds until he takes his final breath. And I can't fucking wait.

A smile curves my lips as I watch him shove yet another couple thousand into the black duffle bag. Not his money, but ours.

My smirk only grows as the hands rotate slowly on my watch.

I've got it planned down to the very second.

Every action and interruption accounted and planned for.

Like a chessboard—where every move's been calculated and opposed.

Because that's the only way you can win a game like this.

As my watch hits 10 p.m., I start my timer to count down the last three hundred seconds of his measly life. Five minutes—that's all he's got left.

I hack into his security system and disable it. And a beautiful game of chess begins.

He lifts up his phone as it flashes with the notification that his security system's been breached. His eyes widen as he punches a number into his cell's speed dial.

I jam the signal.

He snatches up his landline to call for help.

I cut the power.

He grabs his radio.

I turn the waves into a shitty pattern of static.

He reaches for his panic button.

I cut the line to the battery.

He yells out for his best money can buy private security.

I use my sniper rifle and fire. One drops like a marionette with cut strings. The second barely has time to turn before a hole opens in his forehead. The last three scramble for cover—but I'm faster. Three shots. Three bodies.

I jog out of the property and across to his villa. My boots hit the pristine limestone wall, and I bolt over it and land silently on my feet.

Show time.

One twist of a neck. And the guard goes down.

I chance a glance at the windows where Romanelli is pacing in his study. My lip twitches as I dispose of the remaining two guards in a similar fashion.

I tilt my neck until it cracks, releasing the tension. My shoulders roll back before I begin stacking the bodies together. Easier for clean up if they're all in a nice little pile. The cleaning boys should thank me for being so fucking considerate. They won't, but a guy can hope.

I make my way into Romanelli's luxurious villa.

It's taken me six days to prepare everything for tonight. Meticulous. Nothing left to chance.

Romanelli thinks he's smart. But I'm fucking smarter.

As I approach the study, the door bursts open, and the blustering idiot curses me out in Italian. Pleading with God and me to save him.

But God's not listening—and the devil doesn't care.

He scrambles back to his safe for the pearly hand pistol he's stashed there for safekeeping.

A gun that I've already got tucked into the waistband of my combats.

I shake my head, lifting my shirt to show him his pistol—the only chance he thought he had at surviving.

Check.

Sixty seconds remain.

He tries to run.

And bullets in his kneecaps keep him from going anywhere.

"Please..." he croaks in broken English.

This is the part I hate. The groveling and sniveling. As if that'll fucking sway me. It never does. I don't fucking care.

"I—I didn't know..."

“Not my problem,” I clip in a bored tone.

“I can pay you.”

“Nah. Not interested.”

“My knees are fucking killing me... Oh Jesus, why did you have to shoot me? What can I give you...?”

I shake my head. It doesn't work, but they always try it. It's as tedious as it's predictable. And I miss the element of challenge in it all. While no two hits are ever the same, men are awfully unimaginative when faced with the barrel of a gun.

“Send Saint Peter my regards, figlio di puttana.”

The flash of the muzzle fills the space.

The choke of his scream dies abruptly.

And the thud of his body sounds in the study as he falls back.

Checking my watch, it's all run perfectly down to the last single second. Like fucking clockwork.

Check and fucking mate.

A quietness descends. Thank fucking God that I don't have to listen to any more of his fucking pathetic pleas. Maybe I need to send these guys a handbook of advice: One Hundred Original Things To Say If An Assassin Ever Invites Himself Into Your Home.

I relish the silence. My eyes slip shut, and I let out a breath.

Pathetic fucker. I kick his foot away from mine, shaking my head. My lips curl into a cruel smile of satisfaction. It should bother me how well I do this. How easy it comes. A better man would be haunted by the number of times I've planned someone's death down to his last strangled second, the sheer number of men I've sent on their way to Saint Peter—although it'd be much more accurate to say that I sent them on their merry way to convene with Hades.

But I'm not a better man. And it doesn't fucking bother me.

I'm a Veneti. A hitman for the Imperiosi. The damn best hitman at that. Feelings and guilt have no place in my life. Especially not over this fucker. He should've been more careful who he tried to screw over.

The flat of my tongue runs along my teeth as I shove my gun into the back of my waistband, tossing Romanelli's fucking joke of a handgun on top of his body.

With another small exhale, I turn toward the exit, reaching for my phone at the same time as it starts to vibrate.

Shit. It's Christian.

I mentally scold myself. Things have been so hectic here that I haven't had time to really catch up with him lately, and I'm sure he's probably wondering why he hasn't heard from me. Because as well as being my cousin, he's now also the Capo of the Imperiosi.

I sandwich my phone between my ear and shoulder as I jog down the stairs. "What's wrong?" I ask as I get into my car, not bothering with pleasantries. This isn't a social call. It's a problem. One I'm going to have to clean up.

"You need to come back."

The hairs on the back of my neck bristle. "Back? To New York?"

"Yes."

New York... I know where my train of thought is going, so I shake my head. My past is a closet full of pain that I'm not ready to reopen. "An assignment?"

"Can't tell you over the phone."

Well, fuck, that's bad.

My lip curls at the idea of even having to step foot in fucking New York. I clench my jaw and shake my head. There's a reason I left New York and made my home base in Philadelphia. I wanted as much distance as possible from the guilt. From the memories.

The ghosts that haunt the city make bile burn in the back of my throat. I shove the sensation down. Locking the feeling that claws my chest back into that black box that rests in the recesses of my mind where it belongs.

Calm. Cool. Indifferent.

That's what I turned myself into. A monster who looks at the world from the outside, who doesn't let his emotions interfere with his job. This is no fucking different.

"I'm dealing with the Romanelli issue right now."

"It's important," Christian clips. "And honestly? You're one of the few people I can trust until I know more." He's quiet for a split second. "My gut is telling me the problem is being caused by one of our own."

His words give me pause. When his father was still in charge, the Imperiosi was run like a well-oiled machine. It was unheard of to hear about someone going rogue and going against the family. And while Christian's words are alarming, they definitely aren't surprising. I don't doubt that members are testing him simply because he's younger and still

getting adjusted to his new role as Capo, but he was born for this. As much as I don't want to step foot in New York, I know I have to put my own personal shit aside for this.

"How soon do you need me there?" I ask on a sigh. It's already late here.

"I'll send a jet for you. Once you land, a car will be waiting to bring you to me," he rattles off. "It'll be like old times before you decided to ditch me and run off to Philly."

I grind my teeth as memories try to swirl to the forefront of my mind. "You know I had my reasons, Christian," I say, my voice tight.

"I know. At least this job will give you a distraction with your birthday coming up and all. I know how you feel about celebrating it."

I clench my jaw so tight that it aches, a flurry of fragmented memories cracking open and clawing at the edges of my mind.

The gunshots.

The screams.

The blood.

So much fucking blood. Warm and sticky on my hands. I can still feel it...

"Saint?" Christian calls out, his voice like an inflatable raft saving me from the violent waves of memories threatening to drown me.

"Yep." I blow out a long breath as I focus on trying to calm my racing heart.

"I'll see you soon."

I drag a hand through my dark hair, wishing I could say no, but saying no to the Capo isn't an option. He isn't making the request as my cousin; he's making the request as my boss. At the end of the day, I still have a job to do. "Yeah," I murmur.

"Good," he says and hangs up.

There are no goodbyes as Christian and I disconnect. Just the lingering pit in my stomach.

Clenching my jaw, I start the car, letting the purr of the engine soothe some of the tension within me. Speeding from the villa, I hit up the clean-up crew as I take the turns with a controlled ease, using the rumble of the car to ease the tightness building in the back of my neck.

I drive the long distance back to the apartment I keep in Italy. I sit in complete silence, wanting to be alone with my thoughts before I return to

the one place I prefer to avoid.

Can't run forever, I think to myself with more than a trace of bitterness, my hand tightening on the steering wheel. Even though I know that thought to be true, it still doesn't stop me from wanting it not to be.

Before I get to my place, I stop off to collect my two dogs from the dog sitter.

The moment I ring the doorbell, I hear the familiar scratching of paws against the floor. My heart lifts. I've only been gone a few days, but it feels like forever.

The door swings open, and in a flash of fur and excitement, my two Huskies practically tackle me to the ground. Their black and white coats blur together as they jump up, tails wagging wildly and paws propped up against me. I drop to my knees, laughing and letting them smother me in that special way of theirs.

"Hey, I missed you too," I murmur, rubbing behind their ears. They lean into my touch, their icy blue eyes shining and their velvety noses nudging against me. And the weight in my chest eases a little.

When I arrive at my apartment, I throw together a bag with some clothes, my laptop, and a spare gun. As I pack, my mind runs through every possible scenario I might face when I get to New York.

Has Christian found a traitor among us? Is someone doing shady deals that jeopardize our operations? Do we have a rat?

"Don't get too far ahead of yourself," I murmur out loud. I'm sure it's something serious, or Christian wouldn't be calling me all the way to New York. But it definitely makes me uneasy to know that someone among us can't be trusted.

Once I have my bag ready, I stop in the living room to grab a phone charger. My eyes fall on the photo that sits on the shelf, the beaming smiles sending a knife through my heart.

It's a miracle that I still even have the photo. The mere sight of it is a constant reminder and a continual cause of pain every single time I see it.

I swallow the growing knot in my throat and force my gaze away. Making a beeline for the front door, I slip into my made man role as I flip off the light and prepare myself for whatever awaits me in New York.

"Fuck me," I exhale. Looks like I'm going back to New York. Home fucking sweet home.

* * *

As soon as I land in New York, Christian has a soldier deliver an SUV for my use, together with instructions to head straight over to his casino.

I already feel worn out. Since Christian became Capo, it's been one fucking issue after another with all the power plays going on right now within the Imperiosi.

I'm driving when my cell rings. Glancing at the screen, my heart sinks when I see it's a video call from one of my stupido cousins, Ronnie.

The problem with our family is how many fucking cousins we have. I'm at least fourth cousins with this guy, although I can't even remember exactly how we're related.

I would definitely ignore the call if it was just some random relative, but Ronnie's part of the Imperiosi, and that means his call is almost certainly work-related. I seem to recall he's one of our younger members; he must be around twenty.

"Yeah?" I answer.

"Oh, um, hey there. My name's Ronnie Mainetto—"

"I can read, you know," I clip. "Your name flashed up on my screen."

"Okay, good, good. Well, I'm just calling you because you're my sixth cousin twice removed via Great Aunt Edna—"

"I don't care how we're goddamn related," I snap, already regretting answering his call. "What do you want?"

"I'm with Christian right now, and he says you're near Casino Venice..." He zooms his screen out so that I can see our Capo just behind him.

"Yeah, so?"

"Can you do me a solid and pick up my girlfriend who's near there? Her name's Emerald, and she should be arriving at the casino anytime soon."

I take a deep breath and tell myself to count to ten, but I only make it to two before replying. "Do I look like a fucking Uber to you, Ronnie? What makes you think I want to be a chauffeur for your girlfriend?"

Before he can answer, I raise my voice a little. "Hey Christian, is this guy serious?"

Christian appears next to him on the screen. "He needs her picked up, and I told him you're nearby."

“I’m not here to be a babysitter or play fucking taxi driver for teenagers,” I grit out.

“We’ve just been informed by one of our contacts that the Feds might be about to get a warrant out on Casino Venice,” Christian says. “Emerald’s on her way to work there, so we want her picked up by one of our guys before she gets caught up in any raid and arrested by the Feds.”

Staring at the screen, I narrow my eyes at him.

“Can you just stop being a grumpy asshole for once in your life?” Christian says. “Em’s practically family. She and Jacquetta are best friends.” Jacquetta is Christian’s niece.

“One time, and that’s it,” I mutter. I’m busy enough and don’t have time to carpool some annoying fuck’s girlfriend. “Well? What does she look like?”

Ronnie rattles off a description. “Uh, she’s really pretty, slim, dark hair, and she’s got these amazing green eyes...”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. He could be describing any of hundreds of women in this huge city. It’ll just be easier to look up her photo via the background checks the Imperiosi do on all its members’ girlfriends and mistresses.

“And where exactly will I find her?”

“The location app on her phone says she’s riding the subway right now, so she should be arriving at and exiting the station by the casino in around twenty minutes.”

“Okay, got it,” I sigh.

“Can you tell her—”

“You’re already pushing it by asking me to pick her up, Ronnie. Do I look like a fucking messenger to you? Use your phone and tell her yourself.”

“But—”

I disconnect the call before he can say anything else that will annoy me. He’s lucky that Christian considers this girl as good as family, otherwise I’d be leaving her to take her chances with the Feds.

Thanks to the light traffic, I make it in no time to the subway station near the casino. Bringing up the Imperiosi background check on her, I scroll through the information on my phone.

The photograph of her shows a girl with inky black hair and wide green eyes. I read through some of the summary on her: Emerald Fiorelli;

eighteen years old; daughter of Adagio Fiorelli and Ariana Fiorelli; lives at her mom's apartment; and works part time at Casino Venice.

I click onto the photos of her home and scroll through the rooms which show nothing interesting until I reach the photographs taken inside her bedroom—and specifically the photo that shows her open closet door.

Because lined up in there are rows and rows of shiny dresses. And I can see the majority of them still have security tags attached.

Sitting in my car, I drum my fingers on the steering wheel while I keep a sharp eye out for the girl.

And soon enough, I catch sight of a woman who stands out from the crowd, hurrying up the steps from the station.

She's got a stunning face, glossy black hair, and her beautiful, full curves are clad in a short and sparkly gold dress.

She matches the photo on the file, and I know that I found the woman I've been looking for...

Shaking my head, I come back to the present. I can still smell her scent in my car. It's like chocolate mints—sweet and spicy at the same time.

She's gone inside the casino and disappeared from view now. And I wonder why I'm still thinking about her. After all, it's not as if I'm likely to ever see her again...

CHAPTER FOUR

EMERALD

I still feel jittery every time I think about when I was being arrested. Or *not* being arrested—or whatever that thing was with that man, Saint Veneti.

I'm on my way home from work, and all too soon, the train reaches my station, and I begin the short walk home. Reaching our building, I find that I have to climb the stairs because the elevator is broken yet again.

When I reach our apartment and open the door, everything happens in slow motion.

The resounding *slap* echoing around the dingy apartment.

The sound of my sister crying out.

His arm raised to repeat the motion.

And the snarl he sounds as he gets ready to hit her again.

My bag and keys plunge to the floor.

My heart is in my throat.

"Stop it!" I shriek, running across the room to where Milena's cupping her cheek.

I shove myself between Enzo Hernandez and my sixteen-year-old sister. I can't believe my mom got back together with him. He's a creep and a total loser. And there's no way in hell I'm letting him hit her again.

"Jaspar and Giulietta?" I ask Milena, my words rushing out in a breathless whoosh. "Are they safe?" *Please, please let them be okay...*

“In the bedroom,” Milena whispers. *Thank God. I couldn’t bear for any more of them to be hurt or have to witness this sort of violence.*

Enzo’s hand is still raised in the air, his lips curled in a sneer. He slowly lowers his arm and tugs his creased T-shirt down the front of him as he mutters something under his breath. “I’m going to get some beers,” he grunts to my mom before he storms out, slamming the door behind him.

I stare at it, my chest heaving with every breath I take. “You let him hit Milena?” I cry at my mom, spinning around to face her for a second before turning my attention again to my younger sister. She’s crying, and her cheek is red in the shape of a handprint. “She’s your daughter! What...what’s wrong with you?”

My mom stares at me, but she’s too high to think straight. Her brow puckers. “She said something he didn’t like, I think...”

Disbelief drops my mouth open. “So, you let him *hit* her?”

There’s another noncommittal gesture from her. She’s a completely different person now. Gone is the warm woman who braided our hair before bed and sang to us when we couldn’t sleep. She wasn’t like this when my dad was alive. In her place is someone I don’t recognize most days. Fading further and further from the woman I still cling to as my mom. There are glimpses of that woman still there, but they’re so infrequent that they feel like mirages.

And it breaks my heart to see what she’s let herself become.

“Milena, go to the bedroom,” I say gently.

“But—”

“I’ll be there in just a second. Please?”

Milena nods through her blur of tears.

My hands fist at my sides. What kind of mom lets her low-life boyfriend do this to her kids? Enzo is a complete creep. He owns a chain of sleazy strip clubs, not that my mom ever sees a cent from him. He’s a leech of the worst kind. Enzo keeps trying to persuade my mom to dance at his clubs. Just being in the same room as him is enough to make my skin crawl.

I wait until I see Milena go into the bedroom and the door clicks closed before letting out a sound from the back of my throat. I pinch the bridge of my nose. I can’t tell if it’s disappointment or irritation that’s coursing through me. A mixture of both, probably.

It’s the same thing over and over again with our mom. This is the reason I work so hard. To try and give my siblings a better life than this. They need

to know without a doubt that someone loves them and will always protect them. But that's not what they're getting right now—not here.

"We're leaving. I'm getting an apartment, and I'm taking the kids with me. I'm not going to let your boyfriend *hit* them?"

She shrugs. "Okay, Em. You do what you think is best."

The agreement is so fluid that I feel like I get whiplash. She moves to slump down on the couch.

"That's it?" I stare at her. "Do you...even care?"

She doesn't answer.

I stare at her, blinking slowly. "So, when I find a place, I'll move them in with me. That's the deal."

"Okay."

Deep hurt mixes in with all my emotions. "Fine."

Walking down the short hall, I peer into the room that five-year-old Giulietta and six-year-old Jaspar share. They're sound asleep, and I send up a silent prayer to whoever's listening they weren't awake to witness the whole thing.

My hand clenches the doorknob of the bedroom Milena and I share, and I pause. The thundering beat of my pulse drowns out any other sound. My mouth feels dry. How am I going to afford a new apartment? Picking up more shifts is impossible when I'm already working as many as I can. And asking Ronnie for another gun run is out of the question. I can't risk ending up in prison because who would take care of the kids then?

I'll figure it out. *I have to figure it out.* I want the kids to be safe and happy. My grades really suffered during my last year of high school because of all the stress of my home life, and I promise myself that I'll not let the same thing happen to the kids.

I push open the door and let it click softly shut behind me. I move on instinct, cradling Milena in my arms as she cries.

When she's done stumbling through what happened, I give her a reassuring smile, kiss her forehead, and tell her it's all going to be okay. As I do whatever I can to soothe her, I'm calm and collected on the outside but a storm on the inside. There's so much to do now. Because if Enzo's hit her once, he'll do it again—and maybe not just to Milena next time. I can't let that happen to Milena or the other kids ever again. It kills me just thinking about what's just happened.

I stroke her hair and murmur words of comfort, waiting until she's a little calmer. "Let me see, Milena." She lifts her face. It's a nasty mark, but it should fade in a few hours. "I'll get you some ice in a minute."

I hear the door creak open and look up to see Giulietta sneaking in. "I heard noises," she says in a sleepy voice.

She must have heard Milena and me talking. "Come here," I say softly, and she climbs into my lap, hugging her stuffed bear to her. I bury my face in her hair. She smells like soap and innocence all rolled into one.

"Will you be here to take us to school tomorrow morning?" she asks, her voice hitching with anxiety.

"Of course, munchkin," I say in a voice which I make as soothing as possible. I absolutely hate that the kids are being affected by all this stuff going on around us. I take the kids to school almost always now, especially after my mom messed up with this a few too many times recently. And if I can't do it myself, I find a friend to take my place.

"We're so lucky having two moms," Giulietta says as she snuggles into me. "We have Mom and then we have you as well."

"And you'll always have me," I reassure her. They count on me, and I'll never bail on them.

I slip out of the bedroom and gather some ice from the fridge to bring back to the room. Unsurprisingly, my mother is nowhere to be seen now.

Getting our own place is going to cost a lot. Much more money than the cash I have in my bank account right now. Rents in New York are eye-wateringly expensive, plus there's the deposit, utilities, and everything else. Thank God that I've got my nest egg of stolen dresses. That's the *real* reason I steal—to have money when disaster strikes. I already saw what happened when my dad was killed and we were left with absolutely nothing, and since then, I've been determined to never be in that situation again. I know what I do is horribly wrong, and I promise to myself that I'll stop stealing after we get over this hurdle. But tonight, I'll be putting all my dresses up for sale on ebuyer.com, and those sparkly outfits are going to be our way out of here. I should have sold the dresses instead of running those stupid guns, but now I thank God that I didn't because it means I still have the dresses as a fallback.

I make a mental note to also get one of those machines so that I can cut the security tags off the dresses. A finality settles over me. I'll do whatever it takes to get the kids to somewhere away from harm. They deserve to

grow up in a place that's warm, safe, and full of love. They deserve so much more than what our mom can give them right now. We deserve more than that.

* * *

I'm on an early shift which means I'll be home before the kids get back from school, so at least I won't have to worry too much about Enzo today. But tomorrow and the next day, I'll need to find someone to keep an eye on the kids until I finish work. If I can't get a friend to do it, I'll have to pay a sitter, and that's something I really can't afford.

I'm already anxious about how I'm going to find an apartment to rent and how I'm going to afford it. Places around here are far from cheap, and I don't want the kids to have the upheaval of moving schools again. But a bartender's salary doesn't go far in this city, especially when it has to support one adult and three kids.

I pluck a dress off the hanger, admiring the shade which the tag describes as *Sunset Hues*. I'm desperately hoping what I get for all my dresses added together might be enough to get us out of here and well away from Enzo. But until they sell, I may as well wear them.

I slip the dress on before rushing around the room to quickly apply a little make up. My phone beeps with an incoming video call, and checking the phone, I see it's from my best friend, Jacquetta.

"Hey," I say in a rush.

"Hey, is this a bad time or something?" Jacquetta asks. Nicki, my other bestie, waves in the background.

I run a brush through my dark locks as I give them the short version of what happened with Enzo last night.

"That sucks," Nicki says when I finish, sympathy soaking her words.

"I can't imagine how hard that is," Jacquetta adds.

"Yeah, it is, but I'm used to it by now. I just hate that I can't shield the kids from my mom's constant messed-up relationships, you know?"

"I understand," Jacquetta says. "Well, I was calling to see if you wanted to hang out with Nicki and me, but I didn't know you had to work."

I close my eyes for a brief moment and sigh inwardly. "Trust me, I'd much rather hang out with you guys than deal with wealthy, entitled creeps

at the casino. I hate to cut this short, but I'm running late. Can I text you later?"

"Sure. Talk to you later, Em!" Jacquetta says, and Nicki blows me a kiss as they hang up.

I slip my feet into a pair of stilettos and give myself a quick glance in the mirror one more time before I rush out of my room.

By the time I reach the living room, I find my mother already asleep. I exhale softly, walking over and putting a blanket over her before leaving the apartment.

When I arrive at the casino, I slip my bag into my locker, pausing to take a quick photo of the two dresses I have in there. There's a bronze dress and a blue dress, and to my shame, they were my steals last week. Then bringing up ebuyer.com, I add a new listing for each dress. The proceeds from the bronze dress will go into my apartment fund while what I get for the blue cocktail dress will go to the single moms' shelter.

Jacquetta has told me so many times that stealing two dresses at a time is dumb because it doubles the chances of getting caught. But I don't see it like that. And it's always been the way I operate, so that I have one dress for my rainy-day fund and one dress to sell for the single moms' shelter. I know stealing and then giving some of the proceeds to a charity isn't anywhere near enough to absolve me from my sins, but I just feel I have to do something to help those families out there, especially after my family ended up at one of those shelters. I still remember what it was like arriving at the shelter with my mom and siblings after we were left with nothing when my dad died. The feeling of desperation everywhere around us and the fear of what the future would bring. I know my reasons and methods are completely messed up, just like everything else about my life. One day, I'm going to figure out a proper way to help the shelter. I already volunteer one evening a week there, but it never seems enough.

Finishing the listings, I clock in and head to the bar. "Get me five glasses of champagne, and hurry up," a nasal voice demands, and I turn around to face my first customer. It's Ria Gioberti. *Just great.* I catch sight of the table she indicates, and I see that she's sat with a handful of our ex-classmates from St. Saviors. I smother a sigh. Ria's dad is an Imperiosi captain, so she has plenty of money to spend at a place like this, but I really hope that she isn't going to spend my entire shift hanging out here.

Things are busy, and I make up drinks swiftly, trying to keep up with the orders. A while later, things calm down a little, and I've just finished rearranging the vase of fresh red roses that's on the bar. I take a moment to inhale their heady scent. The casino has black and red décor, and there's always fresh red flowers throughout the place.

The supervisor is on her break, and there's no customers to serve, so I take out my phone and check the latest chess game I'm playing. It's an online chess website where you can play to win money. It's a useful side hustle for me, especially when I've got so many bills to pay.

I check my opponent's latest move. I'm playing the Sicilian Defense, but I've chosen to go with the Taimanov Variation. After my most recent moves, I can tell that my opponent is off balance. My excitement is mounting because we're not far off the endgame.

I'm pondering my next move when I sense a customer approaching the bar. Looking up with my usual welcoming smile, my expression suddenly freezes. Because I find myself staring into the eyes of the last person I expected to see here today...

I snap the phone's off button to make the screen blank. "What are you doing here?"

"Is that how you greet all your customers?" Saint drawls.

"I don't like liars," I blurt out.

He raises an eyebrow. "I lied to you?"

"You never told me that you weren't a cop."

"You never asked." The silence beats between us. "And I thought I'd get more information out of you that way."

"More information out of me?"

"Yeah," he nods. "You know, like getting to know you."

My eyebrows shoot up. "*You couldn't just make small talk like a normal person?*"

He shrugs. "I don't do small talk."

I open my mouth but then close it. He thinks it's okay to scare someone like that because he wants to get to know them but wants to get out of making small talk? *Jesus*. "If you weren't a cop, why on earth did you have me locked in the back of your car?"

"I had the child locks on."

My jaw drops. "*Child locks?*"

He shrugs. "What can I say? The thought of a woman locked in the back of my car and at my mercy does something to me."

I laser him with a glittering glare.

"Look, I never said I was a cop."

"But you *knew* I thought you were one. I thought I was under arrest or something. It's called lying by omission."

"I didn't read you your Miranda rights."

"Yeah, well, when someone's terrified like that, it makes it hard to think straight," I mutter, annoyed with myself that I never thought of that. I shake my head. "I assume you're standing here because you want something to drink? So, what can I get you?"

"Whiskey. Neat." He slides some bills across the bar.

My head bobs, and I move to grab the glass and bottle, pouring it like I've done a hundred times before. I decide to change the subject as I slide his drink across to him with a smile. "You still haven't told me your name."

"I told you, you can call me Saint."

I exhale a soft sigh. How can one man be so infuriating yet magnetic at the same time? "What are you doing here anyway?"

"Meeting Christian." He's gazing intently at the vase of red roses in front of him.

I turn around to stack some clean glasses on the counter.

And by the time I turn back, I find he's ripped the petals off half the roses, leaving them scattered on the bar top.

I'm distracted by the look that passes over his face, but only for a split second. "What do you think you're doing?"

He looks up. "Sorry... I just hate red roses."

My eyes widen. "Let me guess, you're the sort of person who also hates children, animals, rainbows, and unicorns."

"And I bet you're the sort of person who loves those things," he retorts as he looks at me carefully.

I shrug and can't help a wide smile. "Sure, stuff like that makes me happy. I mean, rainbows are beautiful, unicorns are magical, and kids and animals are cute, so what's not to like?" I know I probably sound like an idiot, but with the mess my life is in, I like to take pleasure from the small things.

He continues to look at me like he's trying to figure out a puzzle. And then his eyes trail down my face to my lips, his intent gaze making a

strange sensation prickles over my skin.

I start to tidy up the petals before the supervisor complains about the mess. A couple of petals flutter to the floor on his side of the bar, so I walk around to retrieve them.

Crouching down next to his bar chair, I see his wallet peeking out from the inside breast pocket of his jacket which he's slung over the back of his chair.

I have a sudden idea.

And without another thought, I slip the button on the pocket open and swipe his wallet. Okay, it seems like a good idea at this very moment, but I'm not exactly known for making the best decisions in life. And I slip it into the pocket of my apron before picking up the ripped red petals and walking back behind the bar.

At that moment, Christian makes an appearance. "Ready?" he says to Saint.

"Yeah," he replies, downing the rest of his drink. "Thanks," he murmurs as he walks off toward one of the tables at the back.

"Jeez, Emerald, those flowers look a real mess," Christian comments as he frowns at the vase of roses before following Saint.

I send a scowl after Saint, and as soon as the coast is clear, my hand slips into my pocket, my fingers wrapping around the expensive, smooth leather of his wallet.

Whipping it out, I flip it open.

And I immediately find what I'm looking for.

His driver's license.

With his real name.

And when I see it, I huff out a sigh of disbelief.

You've got to be kidding me.

CHAPTER FIVE

S AINT

I can feel Emerald's eyes on me as Christian and I walk over to one of the back tables to talk. And I can't help thinking about the way she smiled at me for just a moment as she spoke—and the way her smile felt like sunshine. *Warm, radiant, soothing.*

I shake my head. I don't need goddamn sunshine in my life. What the hell has gotten into me?

As I walk, I catch sight of Nicki Veneti and pause to give her a hug. Nicki is Christian's cousin, and his family takes care of her. Nicki's mom died when she was young, and then her dad and brother were killed by the cartel. Christian's family saw taking her in as a debt of honor because her dad and brother died protecting his papà.

"Hey, Nicki." A smile tilts up my lips as I give her a kiss on the cheek.

She beams up at me. "Hey, you!"

"You're looking well. Long time, no see."

"I know," she replies. "I've been meaning to get down to Philadelphia to see my grandparents. Hopefully, I'll get to visit them next month."

"Everything good with you?"

She nods. "Yeah, all good, thanks. How about you? I can't remember the last time I saw you in New York. Are you here for long?"

"Not sure." I'm evasive with my answer. "Depends on how long my work takes to wrap up." Then I tell her that I'll take her out for lunch and a

catch up while I'm here in New York, and after she waves me bye, I walk on toward the back tables.

As I walk, I type in the website I caught Emerald looking at on her phone. It's called Chessgenius.com. And I can't help the smirk that dances on my lips. Just what is Emerald Fiorelli up to?

She thought she hid what she was doing, but I was too quick for her. And it's cute that she's so secretive and defensive. Yeah, cute—but her actions only made me more curious.

My thumb taps across my screen as I sign up. Once that tedious business is out of the way, I type in the name I saw her using. *Envy Eyes*. A smile of satisfaction lights my face as I bookmark the tab. I might be able to find out more about what kind of player she is. It's something that's been on my mind since watching her play against the old guy in the park.

But my snooping will have to wait. Unfortunately. I shove my phone back into my pocket as I draw closer to the far booth where Christian has taken a seat. His face is a mask of neutrality while his fingers drum against the polished wooden top of the table. He'd look more intimidating if I didn't have the distinct pleasure of knowing he was once scared of the dark. After my family died, I spent a lot of time with Christian and his family until I moved to Philly to live with my uncle there. And that bond formed at such a young age has given us the deepest trust with one another.

"Something funny?" he clips.

"Not allowed to smile at my favorite cousin now?" I ask with mock indignation as I slide into the booth opposite him.

His fingers drum slower.

I narrow my eyes. We've talked a few times since I arrived in New York, and he messaged me an hour ago, telling me to meet him here. "Your message was a little vague," I prompt. Nobody is seated near us, and Christian's soldiers will make sure to keep it that way while he's conducting business.

He sighs and drags a hand down his face, the mask of Capo slipping slightly. "Shit's fucked."

I huff out a laugh. "Mildly put. Got more than that? Names? Any more leads?"

"Everyone we've looked into has come back clean. I've got names but..." His hand curls around his glass of whiskey, and he lets out another

terse sigh. “No more leads so far. That’s why I’m handing it over to you now.”

“You’ve got nothing more?”

“There’s a lot of people who it could be.” He narrows his gaze on me like I’m challenging his method of handling it. “A fucking lot of them have agendas and are fucking vipers. You know that.”

I raise my hands. “I wasn’t criticizing.”

Christian nods and swills the amber liquid in his glass. “I’ll get you a list of who’s left to look into, and you’ll handle it from here. You’re in charge of this, Saint. You handle it however the hell you see fit.”

“Is it just the casino? No skimming off other revenues? The guns or whatever other pies you got your fingers in?”

“Just the casino from what I can see so far. But we need to check everything else with a fine-tooth comb, especially as it’s been a few months now too.”

I look at him carefully. “I can see the money’s an issue, but what else is going on, Christian?” I know him well enough to know there’s something else. Because although he’s been worked up about this situation each time we’ve spoken about it, it feels like there’s more going on today.

He drags a hand down his face. “There’s a rumor flying around that the Croatians are setting up a new trafficking ring to bring girls into the U.S.”

“So? We already knew they’re into that sort of shit.” While we don’t traffic people, the Croatians are well known for it.

“The rumor includes that an Italian is involved in it—investing in it and being a partner in the scheme. But someone would need a lot of money to buy into a scheme like that. And I’ve got a bad feeling that the missing money might be something to do with that.”

My mind starts ticking. “And if the Italian involved is one of our guys, then the Feds might trace the money back to the Imperiosi. And that would fucking implicate us in the human trafficking.”

Christian nods with a grim expression.

“Fucking Christ,” I mutter. This is worse than I thought. “I’ll get on it right away.”

Christian fills me in on a few more details. While he talks, my eyes flick across the casino to where Emerald leans against the bar again, tapping away on her phone.

And as I study the captivating girl in the gold dress, Christian's fingers snap in front of my face, and I glare as my eyes swing to him. "What?"

"Got something better to be doing or can I have your attention?"

"You've had my attention. I was listening."

Christian snorts. The downside of growing up alongside the man for a good part of your childhood is they know all you tell. My eyes focus on him as he leans forward to see just exactly who's captured my attention. His brow arches. "Emerald?"

I give a noncommittal shrug. "I was just chatting to her while I got my drink. What's her deal anyway?"

Christian settles back in the booth and shakes his head. "She's not a bad kid. Ronnie seems to treat her well enough, or at least, I hope he does. She's got problems though."

"Problems?"

"Family stuff. Anyway, why are you even interested? I already told you, Emerald is best friends with my niece and practically family."

"So?"

"So, that means she's fucking off limits, understood?" He fixes a laser stare on me when I don't respond. "Plus, there's her *condition*."

"What condition?"

"You must have heard..."

"In case it's escaped your attention, Christian, I haven't exactly been around lately. And even when I'm here, I'm not one to listen to idle gossip. So, what the hell are you talking about?"

"You know, the *Little Miss Light Fingers* thing."

"The what?"

"The stealing," he says.

I arch an eyebrow in question.

He sighs. "She has a thing about shoplifting stuff."

I remember the photo of those dresses with security tags in her closet, but I wonder if it's more than that. "What sort of stuff exactly?"

"Girly stuff and that sort of shit."

For a moment, I wonder if he's totally serious, and then I burst out laughing.

"Glad you think it's fucking amusing, Saint. But we don't need any extra attention from the cops."

I finally manage to stop my laughter. “We’re into drug running, money laundering, and murder, and you’re worried about some girl stealing a few pink bows to put in her hair?” I shake my head as I start chuckling again.

“Saint, I’m being fucking serious. She’s a serial shoplifter.”

I can’t help a snort. “Just how serial is serial in this instance?” The question leaves my mouth before my brain can stop it.

“She’s been caught a few times, but no charges were pressed.”

I nod with a hum, rubbing my hand across my jaw.

He takes another sip of his drink. “She’s a hard worker. She lives in an apartment with her mother and three siblings. Her mother has a lot of issues, so Emerald basically has to be a mom to those kids.”

I can already sense that despite the cute smile, Emerald Fiorelli is a complex person. She’s gold-plated dynamite. And I don’t do that. Doesn’t matter how gorgeous she is or how much she intrigues me. “Look, you don’t need to worry about me. You know I don’t do relationships or feelings or shit like that.”

And I mean what I say. Trouble makes problems, and problems make distractions. Distractions get you dead in my line of work, and I’m not about to let any captivating green eyes, beautiful body, or smart mind change that. I’ve worked too damn hard to get where I am today. Cold. Calculating. *Unfeeling.*

I get the job done, and I don’t let emotions cloud my actions.

I avoid anything that has the potential to get messy. And from what Christian’s just told me, Emerald is the definition of messy. It’s better to just forget her and move on. Compartmentalize.

Job first. Women second. Emotions never.

The words repeat and repeat in my head.

All the more reason to focus back on why I’m sitting in this booth in the first place. I turn back to Christian with a shake of my head. “So, how do you want me to do this?”

Christian slides the intel folder across to me. “Read this. Then we can talk next steps.”

I smile down at the folder. This is my favorite part. Dissecting the targets. Lining up all the pieces to fall just where I need them. *Just like a game of fucking chess.*

* * *

After leaving the casino, I head home to Venetiville. The dogs need to be fed and let out. Venetiville is the gated community which is exclusively home to Imperiosi families, and my mansion there is the house left to me by my grandparents.

I scrub a hand across my jaw, rubbing at the stubble. It's important I'm here. I *know* that.

Doesn't mean I fucking like it.

There's a reason I left this place behind in the first place. Being here is like chasing something you can't have.

It feels like the ghosts that linger behind me are reaching out, getting closer and ready to steal the very air from my lungs with every second that skips by.

But Christian needs me here. So, here I stay.

The sooner we figure out who's skimming off the casino and the Imperiosi, the fucking better. The fact that this is happening in the first place is bad enough. But that they've covered their tracks tells me it's someone in the organization.

We just need to turn the pressure up and wait for the traitor to make a mistake and slip up. And when he does, I'll be waiting with the perfect plan to put a bullet between his fucking eyes.

I pull into a gas station to fill up. But when I come to pay, I find my wallet missing.

For fuck's sake.

I had it when I paid for my whiskey. It was in my jacket's inside pocket. I grab my cell and ring the casino. The bar supervisor answers.

"It's Saint here. Did anyone find my wallet at the casino?"

"As chance would have it, I've got it right here. Seems like you must have dropped it."

Yeah, I'm never that careless. And the inside pocket of my jacket is always buttoned to prevent my wallet from falling out. After a moment's silence, I ask my next question very carefully. "Who found it?"

"It was Emerald."

And then I remember her crouching down next to my bar stool when she was cleaning up the petals. *Emerald Fiorelli*. I should have guessed. Not only does she like to lift dresses, but it seems like she's also pretty light-fingered when it comes to wallets...

I head straight back to the casino to retrieve what's mine.

As soon as the supervisor hands it over, I flip it open and scan the contents. Cash, cards—untouched. But my driver's license is in the wrong pocket. My jaw tightens. Why would she...?

Then it clicks. And I figure out what she was up to.

She wasn't after money. She wanted information. She wanted to know my name.

I want to scowl.

But a slow grin tugs at my lips.

Because the realization dawns that Emerald Fiorelli is one smart girl. And for some reason, I like that thought...

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CHAPTER SIX

S AINT

I haven't seen Emerald Fiorelli again since the wallet incident. Not that I expected to. After all, I'm only in New York to help Christian.

I go to Luigi's grocery store for the first time in ages. A lot of the Imperiosi use this place because the owner is connected to the organization.

I need to stock up on dog food, plus I really missed my favorite breakfast cereal while I was in Italy. All the people from the older generation like to talk about the old country like it's paradise on earth. But I've already told Christian that next time, I'm not going to work in any Italian shithole where the local store doesn't stock Lucky Charms. There are many hardships in life I can endure, but going without my favorite cereal isn't fucking one of them.

Perusing the cereal aisle, I feel an irrational anger well up in me as I can't see any Lucky Charms.

They're fucking out of stock? I'm gonna put a gun to Luigi's pea-sized brain and end his miserable life right this very second. There is not much in life that riles me up. But a kill going wrong or a lack of Lucky Charms are some of the very few things that can cause a small crack in my cool exterior. And lately, my feathers have also been getting ruffled by a certain green-eyed girl. But I push that thought away. Because I don't like admitting the effect she has on me...

As I spin on my heel to find Luigi, I catch sight of a single box of my favorite cereal. *Thank the fucking Lord.*

Looking at the box as I stand there with a stupid smile on my face, I admire the brightly colored packaging, deeply inhaling as I'm convinced I can already smell the delicious scent of the sugary oats and marshmallows.

I reach out to take the box off the shelf.

When two tiny fists grab the box. *What the fuck?*

Some kid has just stolen the last box of Lucky Charms right out from under me. Yeah, this is why I can't stand kids. *The sneaky little shit!*

I'm not going to let him get away with that.

I saw them first.

I smelled them first.

I wanted them first.

They. Are. Mine.

Before the kid can get away, I grab one side of the box and give it a tug.

The kid's eyes widen.

But he doesn't let go.

He takes a sharp intake of breath as I pull the box back toward me.

He yanks it into his small body.

I try to pull it out of his hold.

But the kid is surprisingly strong for his age.

I growl with frustration.

Making him nearly leap out of his skin.

But he doesn't let go of the cereal.

And what ensues is a tug of war.

Jesus, he might look like a little kid, but he's like a goddamn squirrel on speed—full of energy and determined not to give in.

Finally, with a twist of my hand, I wrench the box out of his grip. "Get the hell out of here, kid," I mutter, glad to see the back of him as he scurries off to find his mom. She's probably too busy yakking on her cell or flicking through the gossip magazines to have even noticed that her child is going around terrorizing and intimidating other customers in the store. *Fucking parents these days.*

I stroke the box of Lucky Charms before putting it in my basket. Then after getting a few more items, I head for the bakery section.

With my head down as I approach, scrolling through my work emails, I don't take much notice of who else is around.

But then I hear the words no man ever wants to hear in his lifetime:
"That's the evil man who took my Lucky Charms."

As the annoying little voice fills the air, my heart stills for a moment.

Before the faint scent of chocolate mints fills my senses.

And suddenly, I have a sinking feeling that's worse than the Titanic must have ever fucking felt.

A quick glance upward confirms my worse suspicions as I catch sight of a head of dark glossy hair and a pair of glaring green eyes.

It is, without a doubt, Emerald goddamn Fiorelli. Why do I keep running into this woman?

I start to edge away.

Can I sneak behind the stand stacked with ciabatta and focaccia and get away before she realizes it's me?

Shit, I should have worn my black hitman clothes. They make it much easier to hide in the shadows. Fuck, what in the hell is the world coming to when you need to wear your hitman clothes just to go shopping at the local store?

"It's him, sis, I'm telling you," the squirrel squeaks.

Christ, the annoying little shit is her brother?

They both turn around slowly and meet my eyes. "Kid, you've got me mixed up with somebody else," I say uneasily.

He juts his chin out. "No, I haven't." He jabs a finger downward. "You've got *my* Lucky Charms in your basket."

"Why the hell are you looking at what's in my basket? My groceries are *confidential*."

Emerald narrows her eyes at me. "Since when have the contents of a grocery basket been confidential?" The tone of her voice makes it clear that she knows I'm lying.

"Look," I say, rolling back my shoulders. "*He* stole the cereal from *me*. He's obviously learned his light-fingered ways from his older sister."

"I didn't steal anything, Em, I swear. It was the last box on the shelf, and I took it down, and then this man tried to snatch the box out of my hands."

A look of shock passes over her face. "He did?"

"Uh-huh. And when I wouldn't give it to him, he growled at me."

Emerald's mouth falls open as she flicks her eyes toward me. "You *growled*? At a kid? Over a box of freaking cereal?"

“Yeah, Em, he did. He’s a greedy-guts with no manners,” the stupid squirrel adds.

“You’re the one with no manners,” I bark at the kid.

“Says the man with zero manners himself,” Emerald interrupts.

Why on earth is she taking his goddamn side? And why the hell do I care so much? “I’ve got plenty of manners,” I say, unable to help my defensive tone.

“What, like the first time we met and you lied about who you were? Pretending I was in big trouble and that I had to answer all your *invasive* questions—when all along, you could have just told me that the Imperiosi had sent you to get me.”

I open my mouth but then close it, not quite sure how to answer that.

“Don’t worry, Jaspar, we’ll stop by Jacquetta’s house on the way home,” Emerald soothes. “She always has some Lucky Charms, and I’m sure she won’t mind lending us a box.” She tosses her hair over her shoulder and turns back around to grab some focaccia.

And I find that her ignoring me like this is rubbing me up the wrong way. Plus, as soon as she’s not looking, the stupid squirrel thumbs his nose and wiggles his fingers at me.

I can feel my blood pressure rising. Trust Emerald Fiorelli to be involved in this whole incident. What the hell is it about this woman that causes my cool, calm, and collected exterior to feel like a bulldozer has just rammed into it?

I watch as they go pay for and pack their groceries, and at the end, Emerald gives a big smile to the cashier as she thanks her. And as I watch her smile, I can’t help wondering why I’m such a grumpy asshole at times and why my interactions with this girl always seem fraught with tension. And I start to wonder how it would feel to receive another one of those beaming smiles from Emerald Fiorelli. Because she does have a beautiful smile...

She’s like a puzzle I want to solve. She puts on these big, sparkling smiles to the world, but I get the feeling that inside there’s more going on, especially with her stealing habit and the family issues Christian mentioned.

Emerald and her brother then leave the store without another word. And I find myself wishing that I had longer to talk to the girl who loves to steal...

CHAPTER SEVEN

EMERALD

Ronnie took me to lunch earlier, and now he's driving me to work. Arriving at Christian's casino, we walk inside together, but our conversation is disturbed by a loud screech. Because as we turn the corner and enter the main floor, we're assaulted by his ma's voice shrieking that she wants a word with Ronnie.

"Okay, I'll catch you later," I mumble as I swiftly extricate myself from his hold and spin on my heel.

"Hang on, Em." He catches my arm. "You've still got ten minutes until your shift starts. Come and say hi to my ma."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"How are you ever going to get her to like you if you don't spend any time with her? She just needs to get to know you a bit, and then she'll start to understand all the amazing things I see in you."

And as he gives me his special smile, I give in. "Let me just get something from my locker." He nods with a grin as I flee to the staffroom out back.

"You're early, Ma," I hear Ronnie say.

"I wanted to spend some time with my favorite boy before my birthday party starts..."

I groan. Ronnie didn't tell me that it's his ma's birthday—or that she's having a party at the casino tonight. Dumping my bag in my locker, I

wonder what I've done to deserve this? If I'd have known that Ronnie's ma was going to be here, I definitely would have turned down this extra shift, even if it meant that I would lose out on the much-needed cash. Because Ronnie's ma takes iciness to a level that goes beyond the coldest temperatures at the North Pole. She really hates me. Although Ronnie says most of it is in my head.

But every time I see her, she ignores me. Or if she does lower herself to look at me, the only thing I get from her is a dirty look. My friends say all mothers are hard to win over; but if you ask me, Italian mothers are a whole different species. To them, looking after their precious sons is akin to participating in an extreme sport—they devote endless energy to the pursuit of this single cause and would even lay down their life if needed.

Looking in the mirror, I straighten my dress—a gorgeous number in a shade called *Metallic Melody*.

Pulling back my shoulders and standing up tall, I walk back to the main floor. But as I approach, I can clearly hear his ma's not so dulcet tones ringing out across the casino.

"Why are you so upset, Ma? I don't get it. What's up?" Ronnie is trying his best to calm her down.

"What's up?" she snaps. "I'll tell you what's up. Marjorie Martinelli just called me and told me that Elsa Liabardi's ex-aunt's cousin's wife's best friend just saw you in a restaurant with that God-awful girl who's a slut just like her hooker mother—"

The word *slut* rings in my ears.

"Ma," Ronnie interrupts, "Emerald's mom isn't a hooker. She's an escort."

"Oh please, her mom can call herself whatever she likes, but everyone knows what she really does when men pay her."

"Ma, you've got it wrong—"

"How could you let me hear it from Marjorie Martinelli of all people?" she yells. Oh jeez, Marjorie is the biggest gossip in town. "The shame! Have you no consideration for your own ma? I raised you to be better than this, Ronnie Mainetto."

"Ma, Emerald's a nice girl."

"A nice girl," she scoffs. "What, with a family like hers! Everyone knows that Emerald Fiorelli is nothing but a gold digger who thinks that her

way back into our wealthy mafia circle is by acting like a whore just like her mother.”

“Ma, you should just give her a chance and let yourself get to know her.”

“What, like you *let* her give you blow jobs in the back of your car? Don’t think I don’t know how she got her claws into you in the first place!”

I wince, a tide of heat rushing up my cheeks. I haven’t actually ever done that in his car, but it’s clear she has a pretty low opinion of me. And now everyone else in the casino knows this as well, given how loud her voice is.

“Why don’t we all go out to dinner together one evening so you can talk with Emerald properly?” Ronnie is suggesting.

I peek around the corner and watch as she cuffs him around the ear. “I don’t want anything to do with that girl.”

“Ma, you’ve got it wrong. Emerald doesn’t do that sort of work like her mom does.”

“Oh, please. Like mother, like daughter. She spread her legs so that you’d notice her. Why else would you even glance at a girl like her? You’re a great catch, while she’s not even worth as much as the trash in the gutter.”

Anger and upset swirl within me.

“I’m not having that girl anywhere near me or our family. Think about what you’re doing to our reputation after all the years your father spent building it up! Keep away from her, Ronnie. I know her type. She’ll get herself pregnant just to trick you into marrying her. *Don’t ruin all the plans I have for our family.*” I wonder what plans she means...

“You just have to get to know her, Ma.”

“I know her type, thank you very much,” she snaps. “I knew her family before her dad betrayed the organization. And let me tell you, Emerald Fiorelli is just as much of a whore as her mother is.”

Ronnie gives a light chuckle. “I know you don’t really mean that, Ma.”

Er, doesn’t she? She sounds pretty darn convincing in her hatred of me. Sometimes, I really have to wonder about Ronnie’s powers of deduction.

“Hey, Em.” I jump as I hear a voice behind me. It belongs to Addison. The casino is already busier than usual. “You didn’t tell me that your boyfriend’s mother was having a private party here today.”

“Didn’t I?” I say in a weak voice. I check the time on my watch and rush behind the bar and clock in, hoping that I don’t look as flustered as I

feel. This isn't how I'd envisioned my shift would go.

A little while later, I feel my heart sink when I notice Ronnie's ma come up to the bar to get another glass of champagne.

"I'll serve her," Addison murmurs, and I flash her a grateful smile.

Even though my hands are clean, I go to the small basin at the rear of the bar and wash. It's no secret that his ma doesn't like me. Emotions swirl within me as everything she said earlier reruns through my mind. I wash my hands again and again, trying to let the ritual soothe me. The nail varnish on my thumb starts to peel at the edges, and shaking my head, I tell myself that I'll only wash them once more, and then I have to stop. Because I don't want anyone noticing and thinking I'm strange.

I definitely don't want to have to deal with Ronnie's ma at this party. I'm just going to have to stay out of her way so that I can avoid her acerbic tongue and cutting comments.

I see Saint sitting at the other end of the bar. Oh jeez, why do I have to deal with him today as well? But luckily, I get called over by someone else wanting a round of drinks, so I have the perfect excuse to ignore him.

Things quickly become busy at the bar as more attendees for the party arrive. I lose count of the number of drinks I prepare, my attention split between my work and looking for Ronnie.

I've only caught his eye in the briefest of glances, and he even gave me a small smile, but I'd be lying if I say it doesn't sting a bit that he actually hasn't come over to talk to me since the party started. He always reassures me that he doesn't care what his ma or anyone thinks, although sometimes I wonder if he's telling me the truth.

"Oh, God, what are *you* doing here?" An annoying, nasal voice interrupts my thoughts. I don't even have to turn around to know that it's Ria Gioberti. *Just great.* It's like all my least favorite people in the world have decided to come together tonight just to make sure that I have the shift from hell. "I didn't expect to see you here," she hisses. "Aren't you too poor to frequent these sorts of gatherings? And I don't want people to think I socialize with someone from the gutter..."

I grit my teeth before turning around to face her. "I'm working, obviously. Do you want a drink?" I know that I have to be polite to her because I can't risk one of the supervisors hearing me be rude toward a customer. I really wish I could say something to Ria and tell her to leave me the hell alone. But when I confronted her at school once, she got her mother

to come in and complain about me being verbally abusive toward her. It was my word against Ria's, and I was warned at the time that I could lose my scholarship place if I got into any further incidents. Money talks, and Ria's family has plenty while my family has next to none. And at work now, it's exactly the same thing—I can't risk getting in trouble because I desperately need this job. I just have to bite my tongue and keep my retorts inside me, the whole time my mind conjuring up all the things I wish I could say to Ria.

She tosses her golden hair over her shoulder and demands a martini.

I tug down at my dress which is riding up a little too much, probably due to the few pounds I've put on recently.

She looks me up and down, a gleam in her gaze. "Hmm, your uniform looks a bit too snug. You've obviously gained *even more* weight. You really need to lose a few pounds if you want to keep a man." She snickers as she watches me. Her cronies have come up behind her and join in with her laughter.

I wince as I hear the cruel words. She is a size zero, and it's something she constantly boasts about, like her weight is something that makes her totally superior to me.

And noticing my embarrassment, she zeros in on my discomfort. "You've obviously been at the cupcakes again, Emerald," she sneers as she cackles another laugh at my expense.

I can't help the flush of red that rushes up my cheeks. I stiffen my spine and glare at her. "Yeah, and they were delicious—*all three of them.*"

Her mouth drops slightly. I doubt she even remembers what sugar tastes like, what with her obsession over being a size zero. I feel a small swell of satisfaction at her expression. Because I'm not letting that mean girl fat-shame me. So what if I've turned to sugary treats a bit too much lately? It's hardly surprising with everything I'm dealing with right now.

Pouring her drink as fast as I can, I'm relieved when she prances off with her friends, thankful that she has other things to occupy her tonight instead of sticking around to insult me. I try to let my job distract me, telling myself that I'm here to work and earn some money. Ria looks over and smirks at me. Why does she keep giving me looks like the cat who's got the cream? It's giving me the creeps. I shake my head. She's just trying to gloat that she's enjoying herself while I have to work.

An hour or so passes, and I'm kept busy with all the drinks orders that keep coming in. I'm trying to ignore Ria, which is hard when she keeps shooting me a smug look like she's just got given an exclusive ticket to the Chanel catwalk show.

I wince as a loud, piercing sound fills the casino. Someone fiddles with a microphone, and conversation ebbs away as people turn toward the small stage.

Ronnie's ma is standing there, looking like the poised mafia housewife she is. No doubt she's about to make some boring speech. I wonder if anyone will notice if I sneak off for a quick break...

"I'd like to thank everyone for joining us here today to celebrate my birthday," she starts, her gaze sweeping across the room. Ronnie and his father join her, standing off to the side as she continues. "This is such an important day for my family." She looks over at someone in the crowd and waves them over. "Please join us..."

I look across, but I can't see who she's waving to.

"And I can't think of a better time or place to make this special announcement." She pauses for dramatic effect. "To strengthen the bond between our families, I'm absolutely thrilled to announce the engagement of my handsome Ronnie to the lovely Ria Gioberti!"

The room erupts with chatter and thundering applause.

I watch Ronnie and Ria step forward on the stage.

But I can't hear anything going on around me.

It's like time slows down to a crawl. Everything is unnaturally still, just like waves that lull before a shattering storm.

My lungs refuse to take in air as I watch that awful girl kiss Ronnie—*my boyfriend*—to celebrate her engagement.

My boyfriend is engaged to another woman.

It blindsides me like a bullet in the back. Nausea roils in my belly. Anger and hurt overwhelm me. I'm not sure what's worse—the fact that he's marrying someone else or that he's marrying Ria of all people.

And a knife slices my heart as she smirks across the room at me as Ronnie wraps an arm around her waist with a small smile.

And when he meets my gaze, his eyes flash with what I know is an apology, but I can't even bear to look at him.

How long has he known about this? And what was that conversation with his mother earlier? Was he planning on keeping me as his mistress

after marrying Ria? Is that why he wanted his mother to get on with me?

I can't remember a time I've felt so betrayed by someone. It's devastating to love someone but then learn they were never really yours to begin with. I came to work in a relationship, but now, I've been dumped in front of the whole Imperiosi. Lots of people are shooting curious glances my way. It's common knowledge that Ronnie and I have been dating for ages. But I can't get my feet to move so that I can flee from their intrusive stares. It's like I'm on a stage and the whole world is sneering at me.

Addison comes over to me. "I'm so sorry, Em," she whispers, breaking me out of my reverie as the sounds of the room come crashing back to the surface.

I can't bring myself to speak. I'm even afraid to take too deep of a breath in fear that my tears will fall if I do.

Because no matter how hurt I am, I refuse to give Ria the satisfaction of knowing she's hit me where it hurts.

Everything in me wants to run far from here, to escape outside and scream until I go hoarse. But I don't have the luxury of doing that. Because I need the money from this shift. There are so many bills to pay, plus Giulietta and Jaspar both need new clothes and shoes. They grow out of everything so quickly at their age, and it's a struggle to keep up with it.

All this situation does is remind me how insignificant I am to others. As far as they're all concerned, I was only ever someone Ronnie was messing around with.

Addison has set sparkling crystal flutes on a silver tray, and I'm now filling them with celebratory champagne, trying not to let my hand shake.

Ronnie's ma is standing near the bar now, accepting congratulations from all her cronies, while Ria's voice rings out from across the room. His ma drones on and on about how the marriage will bring the families together and how the alliance will make the Imperiosi even stronger.

Every word that comes out of her mouth just makes me feel worse, wounding me as reality stabs a sharp stake through my heart.

How can I have been so damn stupid? I should have realized something was up, and I should have seen the goddamn signs.

But the worst thing is that aside from being my boyfriend, I thought he was my best friend. And now I've lost both. Because a best friend would care enough to at least warn me.

He suddenly appears at the bar—thankfully, without Ria—and looks at me with his puppy dog eyes. “Em, look...” He rakes a hand through his hair as he sighs deeply. “My family, um, you know...”

I can’t even look at him. I don’t want to see his pity or sympathy or guilt.

Ria skips over next to him, slobbering a kiss full on his lips before shooting an evil smirk at me. “Two flutes of champagne,” she orders in a sickly singsong voice. “After all, I have to celebrate the fact that I’ve bagged the best guy here.”

Even though I absolutely hate her guts and am raging with Ronnie right now, I’m still on the clock and can’t refuse to serve them. Losing my boyfriend is bad enough, but I can’t afford to lose my job on top of that.

I snatch two flutes from the tray and slam them down in front of them, the liquid slopping over the rim of the glasses. I might have to serve them, but I certainly don’t have to look happy about it.

“We’re trying to make the family stronger,” Ronnie says, finally finding his voice. “I didn’t want to hurt you or anything, but...you know how these things go...”

I can’t handle hearing his words, so I turn my back on them and find Addison.

She looks at me with concern etched around her eyes. “Oh hon, is there anything I can do for you?”

“I just need a few minutes,” I whisper.

“Of course,” she says, squeezing my shoulder in sympathy.

I walk off, but I find Ronnie following me, this time without Ria sticking to him like a leech. He grabs my arm and spins me around to face him.

“You could have told me beforehand in private!” My words hurl through the air like an express train about to come off the rails.

“I thought this was the best way to tell you,” he says in a weak voice.

“What, in public, in front of the whole Imperiosi?”

He shrugs. “I thought you’d be more likely to accept it if it was a done deal. And we can still carry on seeing each other after I’m married. Lots of made men keep a mistress.”

I close my eyes briefly. “So, you’re saying I’m good enough to bang, but I’m not good enough to marry?”

And when Ronnie doesn’t reply, I have my answer.

“Great, as well as being called a slut and a gold digger, now I can add ‘idiot’ to the glowing opinion most of the gossips have of me,” I mutter.

“Em, I need to marry someone whose family is important in the organization...” He leaves the words unsaid, but I know that can't be me. Because of what my father did and what my mother does now. Ria's dad is a captain, however, making her the perfect partner for him.

He still hasn't actually said the words, *I'm sorry*. Actually, his apology should've come yesterday—when he should've given me a heads up about what was going to happen at the party. But he never did that. Instead, he just let me find out along with the rest of the Imperiosi, as if I meant nothing to him.

“Look, Em. Maybe you're not cut out to be a wife to someone like me.”

“And what's that supposed to mean?”

He gestures at me. “Well, you know...”

“Just say what you mean, Ronnie.” I haven't got a clue what he's getting at.

“Well, you know, my ma says that mafia wives have to meet certain standards.”

“Like?”

“Come on, Em. You know you've let yourself go a bit lately.”

“*Let myself go?*”

“Yeah, with your...weight and stuff.”

My eyes widen, and my cheeks flush. I've gained a few pounds over the last couple of months, and my curves are even fuller than normal. That's hardly a crime. But I'm so stunned for a second that I can't get a response out.

“My ma says that it's a bad sign. Because if you're like this now, what are you gonna look like after you've given me six kids?”

“What makes you think I was ever going to give you six kids, Ronnie?” My voice drips with disbelief.

“But my ma says that it's important for a man like me to have an heir and plenty of spares.”

“For God's sake, Ronnie, you and your crazy ma can just go to hell!”

It's humiliating enough to be treated like this in front of everyone, but for Ronnie to then criticize my body makes a wave of mortification flood through me. Okay, so I'm not a size zero or anywhere near it. So what? I've got boobs, hips, full thighs, and an ass, and I don't starve myself. What's

wrong with that? Why are women always goddamn judged by their looks and weight?

“Look, Em—” he starts to say.

“And just to be clear, we are over. *Freaking done*. I’m not goddamn being a mistress to you or anyone else. I’m worth a hell of a lot more than that.”

“Aw, Em, don’t be like that.”

“Ronnie, let me tell you one thing. I want to be loved by a man for who I am inside, not on my looks and weight. What if I was in an accident and disfigured or something? *I want a man who wouldn’t care because he loves me just the way I am*. I want a man who appreciates me for my worth and treats me like his queen. And I definitely don’t want to be with a man who judges me with his shallow and superficial standards.” I can’t talk to him anymore. “Just leave me alone, Ronnie.”

Pulling away from him, I briefly return to the bar and pour myself a double shot of tequila to take with me. I need something to soothe me, and given murder is wrong, I’ll have to settle for alcohol.

Leaning against the wall outside, the events of the last twenty minutes roll through my mind on repeat. Is there something wrong with me? How could I have been so freaking wrong about Ronnie? And how did I not see any of this coming? And it just leaves me feeling so...unlovable. And so worthless.

This doesn’t feel real. This *can’t* be real. I’m not sure who I should be mad at—Ronnie for humiliating me or his stupid family for putting him up to this.

And it feels so personal as far as his ma is concerned. Because out of all the Imperiosi establishments his ma could have chosen for tonight’s party, she had to choose the casino I work at. Could any of this be an even bigger slap in the face?

I feel like I’ve had a bucket of frozen water thrown all over me. No, that’s a freaking understatement—not something that I can often be accused of—because I feel like I’m being drowned by a tsunami wave of humiliation, hurt, and unhappiness, unable to reach the surface to suck in a lungful of calm still air to soothe my racing mind.

I’m savoring each sip, clicking my bracelet clasp open and shut with my free hand, when Saint walks out of the casino and joins my side.

He's the last person I want to see. He probably just wants to gloat he was right when he said the first time we met that Ronnie would never marry me. He lights up a cigarette.

I swipe a tear away from my cheek. "Can you find somewhere else to smoke please," I huff. "I need a bit of peace if I'm going to wallow in my misery."

"This is the only area where smoking is permitted," he says in his infuriating languid voice.

"You have to choose now to care about doing the right thing?"

He exhales a ring of smoke that's as perfect as an angel's halo. "You've lost me."

"You didn't care about doing the right thing and telling me the truth about who you were when I thought you were a cop," I clip. But deciding I don't want to get into this with him right now, I turn my body slightly away from him, and we both stand in silence. I take another sip as our eyes trail the pattern of hazy smoke as it disappears into the deepening dusk.

His voice penetrates my musings. "I got my wallet back, thanks."

"You're welcome, Valentino." I don't know why I feel the need to call him by his real name, but calling him by his nickname just seems too pally, too intimate.

"You know, you're smart enough to have worked out my name without having to resort to stealing my wallet."

With his birthday being on Valentine's Day, maybe I should have been able to guess. I shrug. "It was quicker than playing guessing games with you."

"I like games."

"Well, I don't." The silence beats between us. "Anyway, how come you're a tough mobster but named after the patron saint of lovers?" I can't keep the incredulity—and faint curiosity—out of my voice. I can't see him delivering love to anyone. Maybe hate but definitely not love. Because from everything I've seen and heard of him, he's cold, brutal, and heartless.

"Hey, he was the patron saint of beekeepers as well," he adds in a mock injured tone.

"Beekeepers? I didn't know that."

"Not many people do."

We slip into silence again, and I let the liquor soothe my frayed soul.

"I came outside," he starts in a casual tone as he keeps his eyes on the sky, "to check if you're okay."

My eyes widen. "What, because it's a *super-relatable* moment when your cheating boyfriend gets engaged to a girl you hate?"

"You'll go onto bigger and better things."

"I can't talk about it. I'm in mourning."

"The fuck you are," he says in a hard voice.

"*Excuse me?*"

"You're not upset. You're embarrassed, humiliated, mortified."

My breath exhales with incredulity. "I'd bet on my life that no one's ever told you that you have a comforting manner."

He just stares at me, his eyes making a heated feeling spread over me.

"Look, if you've been sent out here to ensure that I'm not thinking of making a scene in there, you don't need to worry. I know this isn't *Jerry Springer*. I'm not about to march over and punch him in the face."

"Why not?"

My jaw drops as I turn my face toward his.

"Look, don't get upset," he drawls.

"That's easy to say if you're coldblooded. My heart's been broken. How else am I supposed to feel?" I wail.

"Your heart isn't broken, sweetheart. Trust me, you'd know if it was. Focus your energy into getting angry."

"And what good is that going to do?"

"It'll make you feel better." He drops his smoke and grinds it out with the heel of his handmade Italian shoe, before sauntering back to the casino.

As he walks away, he passes Ronnie's orange Lamborghini, and I hear the harsh jagged sound of metal grating against metal like nails on a chalkboard. And I realize that he's just keyed Ronnie's brand-new car.

Something about it makes him appear almost human instead of someone who's cold and untouchable.

I feel the tips of my mouth pull upward...

And, just for a moment, I let a smile replace the upset in my broken heart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

S AINT

I meet Christian in the back office at Casino Venice the following week.

“The IRS are all over the casino,” Christian grits out. “They’re looking for any irregularity to get us on. I need your help to make sure everything’s in order and any loose ends get tied up.”

I nod. “If the IRS finds anything at the casino, then they’ll have grounds for getting warrants to investigate other Imperiosi businesses. And that would be a fucking disaster.”

The casino is the only such establishment in downtown New York, and it’s a hugely important part of our business. Casinos aren’t permitted here under state regulations, but Christian’s a fucking genius and got a Native American tribe to put in a claim for a downtown area as part of their tribal lands. Now, he runs the casino here in partnership with them, and it’s a win-win situation all around. But if the IRS picks up on any irregularities, that could blow the whole operation out of the water.

We start making a plan of what we need to do.

* * *

I head into the main area of the casino which is busy as usual. My mind flits back to the night of Ronnie’s engagement and to what happened to Emerald.

I shake my head. *Why am I thinking about this, and why do I even care?*

I don't have an answer to that question. And that just makes me more pissed off. But no one deserves to be humiliated like she was. That's all there is to my concern. I don't *care* about her. Men like me aren't capable of that emotion.

I sigh heavily. I hate being in this city. And I desperately need some caffeine to distract me. Thank the Lord that they serve coffee at the casino. Heading over to the bar area, it's hard not to notice Emerald. Because not only does she shine like a beacon with her beaming smile and her sparkly, gold dress—no doubt another steal from some poor unsuspecting boutique owner—but she's also got some slimy creep flirting with her. As the man turns to the side, I recognize him as one of Christian's captains, Domenico. Emerald is smiling at something he's just said to her.

For some reason, an uncomfortable feeling washes over me, knocking me off balance for a moment. What the fuck is he doing talking to her? I drop into a chair in front of the bar.

Emerald's eyes widen slightly when she sees me. I guess she probably wasn't expecting to see me again. "I'll be back in a sec," she says to Domenico. "What can I get you to drink?" She flashes a professional smile at me.

And for some reason I don't quite understand, I want to keep her away from Domenico for more than a few seconds. "I'll have a grande caramel macchiato in a venti cup, half whole milk, one quarter almond milk, one quarter non-fat extra hot, quad shots, one and a half decaf and two and a half regular, caramel wall in the cup, with whip, no caramel drizzle on top, two packets of Splenda, one sugar in the raw, two dashes of vanilla syrup, and three short sprinkles of cinnamon. *Please.*" I shoot a satisfied smile at her. My order should keep her busy for a good ten minutes.

But as the corners of her mouth turn down slightly, I find myself suddenly regretting my order. And I don't understand why. Until I realize it's because...I'd rather see her smiling. When I saw her smile before, it made her look glowing and special, and it did something to me...

At that moment, Ronnie comes in, clearly in a bad mood as he glares down at his suit. "Can I get my usual coffee?" Ronnie calls out to Emerald, interrupting her as she's making my order.

"You don't look like a man in the first throes of love," I comment as I watch him sniff at the fabric of his jacket.

“Ria keeps whining that I smell like fish,” he complains as he takes another sniff at his arm.

Emerald puts a cup of filter coffee down in front of him but ignores him otherwise, and he makes his way toward the back office, pressing his nose against his shoulder as if he’s still trying to detect where exactly the smell is coming from.

Emerald then goes back to making my coffee.

“Saint,” Domenico greets me.

I give him a curt nod and then look at the messages on my phone. I have no desire to engage in conversation with him.

And as predicted, after a few minutes, Domenico tires of waiting for Emerald to finish my order. “See you around, Emerald,” he calls with a wave. Guys like that get bored as soon as they’re not getting any attention.

She gives him a nod before she carries on with my order.

I don’t know why, but Emerald feels like a mystery to me, and her opaqueness is utterly infuriating. She’s like a conundrum. I want to know every thought that runs through her mind, every reason for each of her actions, and every single little thing that makes her heart beat faster.

As I wait, my gaze falls on the vase of red roses on the bar top. My fingers itch to rip away the petals. *Red roses, velvety petals, sharp thorns...*

She puts my drink down in front of me, shaking me from my thoughts. “Here’s your drink. And keep your paws off the roses this time please.”

I watch her walk over to her colleague. “I’m going on my break,” she says, and with that, she grabs her bag from under the bar and heads outside.

After a few minutes, I decide I need a smoke and head out to the smoking area.

Emerald barely spares me a glance as I stand next to her.

I hope she’s not still upset about Ronnie. “You know, you shouldn’t waste your time mourning over that dumbass.”

“I’m not,” she clips.

“Look, I’m just saying that he’s not worth it and—”

But before I can say anything else, she grabs a book from the bag over her shoulder and slams it into my chest. I take it from her, look at the cover, and read the title out aloud. “How To Ditch That Loser And Live A Life That Leaves Him Behind.”

And I can’t help a smile—a real smile. And I’m even slightly impressed.

“I’m not mourning him, so you don’t need to worry about me.”

I smoke in silence for a couple of minutes while she checks her phone.

“So,” I say slowly, “I was thinking, maybe I could take you out for a drink sometime?”

A few seconds pass as she exhales slowly. “I don’t think so.”

I’m about to smirk when I freeze. “*Wait! What did you just say?*”

“I said no.”

“But nobody ever says no to me,” I bluster.

She smiles at me. “I’ve got three golden rules in life. Rule one, never date a cop.”

“Yeah, but you know now that I’m not a cop,” I clip.

“Doesn’t matter because rule two still applies.”

“Rule two?”

“Yeah. Rule two, never date a made man.”

“You dated Ronnie,” I grit out.

“Two is a relatively new rule that I made post-Ronnie,” she says with a shrug.

“Oh, come on. I see ‘assassin’ as being more my job title than ‘made man.’ Surely, rule two doesn’t apply to me—”

“And rule three,” she interrupts. “Never date a liar.”

I open my mouth to object but snap it shut again when I realize I haven’t got an answer for that one. Because deep down, I know she’s right. Lying by omission is lying. I’ve been lying for so long that it’s become second nature to me. I tell myself I do it because as a hitman, I need to keep my movements and actions concealed. But I know there’s more to it than that. And I know that my lying is also a way to keep people from getting too close to the real me.

She walks past me, but I grasp her arm to stop her from leaving. I don’t want her to go just yet. “What are you doing with Domenico?” I ask in a low voice.

“Nothing. He was just being pleasant.”

Pleasant, my ass.

I’m about to hand her book back to her when I decide to flick through it. “This guide looks pretty comprehensive,” I comment as I skim through the contents page. “I have to say I’m impressed that you’ve worked through all these stages. Chapter one, shock; chapter two, upset; chapter three, denial; chapter four, grief; chapter five, mourning—”

“Nah, I just skipped straight to chapter eleven.”

My brow furrows as my gaze drops down to chapter eleven which is headed 'Revenge and Retaliation.'

"Um, Emerald, it says under chapter eleven that this is a list of things you should *avoid*."

She shrugs. "The book wouldn't have mentioned revenge and retaliation if it really didn't want you to go down that route." Then a twinkle lights up her green eyes, making them even more luminous than normal.

"What?" I say, for some reason needing to know what she's thinking.

She flicks her inky hair over her shoulder. "I got some cans of tuna, and I sewed bits of fish in the hems of all Ronnie's pants before I gave back the spare key to his apartment."

And I can't help myself from laughing out loud. Jesus, what the hell is wrong with me? I rarely give a genuine smile or laugh, yet I've done both within the last five minutes and all because of this one girl.

"I'm also thinking about going around and burning down his house tomorrow while he's at work," she adds.

My eyes nearly pop out of my head. "Okay, Emerald, while I'm loving how you're standing up for yourself, I'm one hundred and ten percent sure that the self-help guide didn't intend you to become an arsonist."

"Only kidding," she giggles.

The sound of her laugh does something to me, and I'm about to say something when I notice her stiffen as she leans back against the wall.

And suddenly, things become awkward between us.

What the hell's caused this sudden change?

She blinks at me. "I wish you would stop staring at me."

I flick the ash from my cigarette. "Looking at someone hardly counts as staring. You seem like a pretty confident girl, so why are you suddenly so uncomfortable around me?"

"Who's says I'm uncomfortable?"

I scoff softly and shake my head. "Do you always answer a question with a question? Or do you have something to hide?"

She shifts from one leg to another, and I can't help my eyes running over her long legs and up to the hem of her short outfit.

"Does it have anything to do with the *stolen* dress you're wearing?"

A slight flush warms her cheeks, but she keeps her expression neutral. "What makes you think my dress is stolen? I do work, so I can afford to buy things."

I give a slight smirk. "If you say so."

She goes to walk past me to head back inside, and I catch her wrist to pull her toward me, using her surprise to angle her around so that her back's pushed against the stucco wall of the casino.

I spin my body toward her and slam my free hand against the wall, trapping her between my muscular arms.

She presses as far back against the wall as she can.

But there's nowhere for her to run to.

And I like her caged between my arms too much to let her go...

Her eyes track my hand as I lift it lazily to her face.

Placing my finger under her chin, I tilt her head up to me. And I let my gaze drop to her lips for a few long moments.

Her breath hitches.

My free hand caresses down her bare arm before skimming down to the dip of her waist.

My head bends down to her throat. "I like your gold dress," I breathe into the shell of her ear as I stroke her hip.

She let out a rushed breath, her pupils dilating in their pools of green. "It's not gold. It's called *Bronze Breeze*," she exhales.

I push my hand through her hair, not caring that I'm mussing it up. My eyes rake slowly over her heavy breasts heaving under the metallic fabric, moving down to where her dress stops to reveal her bare, shapely thighs.

And lowering my mouth to hers, I slam my lips against hers.

Her hands push against my chest for a few seconds, but as I coax her mouth, she yields to me, meeting my tongue with eager strokes of her own.

My kisses are demanding and aggressive. I knead her heavy breasts, molding them in my hold and enjoying the feel of her nipples hardening under the thin fabric as she arches her back, throwing her head against the wall and pushing her tits into my large hands.

I can't wait to latch my mouth onto her nipples and pull at the hard tips with my lips to make them lengthen.

My tongue caresses along the shell of her ear down to her neck, and she moans as my mouth connects with the base of her throat and nuzzles her.

She shivers as I run my hands down her back and over her ass. And as she squirms against me, I feel her skirt riding up her thighs.

I'm so fucking hard for her. My hands seize the hem of her dress and push under it, making it bunch up around her waist.

Grabbing her ass cheeks, I grind her body into my cock, letting her feel my need for her and making her moan as it rubs against her clit.

My fingers trace the pattern of her lacy thong, itching to rip it off before I sink to my knees in between her thighs.

But first I have to do what I planned to do all along...

I snake my fingers over her exposed ass cheeks and over the small of her back.

"Bingo," I growl into her ear as my fingers close around what I'm looking for.

Her eyes fly open. "What are you doing?"

"I don't think people have a security tag on a dress they paid for," I rumble.

"A what?" she says, trying to act dumb.

"The plastic tag on your dress that you're trying to hide. How did you get it out of the store without setting the alarm off?"

"I have my ways," she mutters before realizing what she's just said.

"So, you're admitting to being a thief?"

"What's it to you, Valentino?" She tugs down her dress and dips under my arm to make her escape.

But I move my arm to bar her way. I'm not finished with her yet...

CHAPTER NINE

EMERALD

I duck under his arm, but he blocks my way. And an unnerving undercurrent unfurls between us.

“Don’t lie to me again, Emerald. You’re a lousy liar, and you won’t get away with it around me.”

I purse my lips. It’s problematic when a dress has a security tag. Not only is it uncomfortable, but it means I have to find a back door or staff exit to go through when I take it from a boutique. But it’s even more annoying when it means I get found out by someone like Saint. I’m awful at lying and just need to get away from him as quickly as possible.

I go to hurry past him and back toward the casino, but he pushes me up against the wall again. “I’m not letting you go that easily...”

Our eyes meet.

But it’s different this time.

I see more in his brown eyes. See how deep they are. How hot. How eager. For me.

He closes what little space remains between us.

My throat tightens.

His lips press up firmly against mine.

And all thoughts fly out of my mind like a ferocious wind seeking freedom in the skies. All I can feel are the demands of his mouth. The heat of his body. The pull of his need.

He parts my lips with his tongue, and grasping my head between his strong hands, he deepens the kiss, sucking my bottom lip and teasing it with his tongue.

I slowly meet his strokes. Breathe him in as I feel his tongue slick against mine. Exhaling softly, I tug him closer, his body grinding against mine as his tongue curls and flicks and teases me. And despite everything, I want him. Everything he's offering and then some.

His passion scorches through me. Stoking the embers of desire low in my belly. I groan and arch my hips, rubbing against him, desperate for more as his deep kisses continue.

He feasts on me, devouring me however he can. His hands roam my body. Cupping my ass, he tugs me closer until his hands caress over my thighs and creep under my hem.

He groans, and I can feel how hard he is against me. He turns his hand to brush his knuckles over my panties with the barest of caresses.

I shudder. "Please..." It's a ridiculous request. But I want him. And my pleasure is one thing I'll let him take care of.

Groaning against my mouth, he kisses me in that same hungry way that has me squirming against him even more.

He jerks my tight dress up. Hitches it around my waist.

And for a moment, I freeze. "It's broad daylight..."

"I won't let anyone see," he growls. His fingers caress the lace of my thong against my swollen folds.

I whimper as my body involuntarily arches into his hand.

"You won't be worried in a few minutes. *Not when you're coming all over my hand.*"

A low sound leaves my throat. It sounds vaguely like his name. But it doesn't matter what I'm saying because he keeps touching me. Stroking me.

Until I want to give him what he wants. And as long as we both get the pleasure we need, nothing else matters right now.

"You're soaking wet, Emerald. Soaked for me." His harsh voice grits out in my ear before licking the spot just below. "As much as I want you loud and moaning for me, I want you quiet, so no one comes out. I need to make sure you finish."

"Yes," I breathe. I don't want him to stop now. Can't have him stop.

"Good girl."

His fingers push my thong to the side. And I hold my breath as he skims his fingers from my entrance to my aching clit. He presses his forehead to mine. "So hot and so fucking wet for me."

He kisses me again, his tongue swirling and flicking to match the beat of his fingers.

I'm moaning at the increased pace.

My legs shake. My thighs tensing around his hand as I get closer with every strum of his fingers against my swollen clit.

My eyes flicker to the parking lot as I hear a car pull in. Someone's going to see Saint pressing me into the wall, my dress hitched up, and his hand between my legs...

"Saint, we'll get caught—"

"That's half the fun, baby," he pants against my ear. "As hot as you are and as much as I've been fantasizing about you, this just makes it all the fucking hotter."

"But someone from the casino might walk past—"

He thrusts two thick fingers into my pussy, silencing me into a gasp. I whimper and bite my bottom lip.

"Bite me instead, baby. Let me feel how much you like my fingers..."

I press my face against his neck as I moan. His fingers curl deep inside me, caressing my G-spot again and again as his thumb works my clit. Teasing and playing with me until I'm weak and dizzy.

I cling to him. Gripping his arms and suit for dear life. Certain my legs are going to give out. "Saint, I..."

I look up and frantically check if the person who pulled into the lot is walking over to the casino yet.

But I can't deny the risk of being seen adds another layer of thrill to what we're doing.

I bite his neck and stifle my moan as he thrusts into me harder and faster.

"Hear that, baby? You're so fucking dripping for me that I can hear my fingers fucking you," he groans into me as he fills my pussy over and over again. "So wet, so tight, so fucking perfect, Emerald. I knew I'd like being with you, but you're even better than I dreamed," he praises, his voice husky and low.

I'm so close. My pussy keeps squeezing around his fingers, and my head falls back against the wall and to the side. I force myself to check if

anyone's approaching.

I hear someone...

But I don't want him to stop. He can't stop. Not now...

I stroke his cock through his pants, needing to feel him. But he shakes his head. "No, baby. This is all about you."

He turns my chin to face him and kisses me deeper, hungrier. He grinds against me, his chest rubbing against my aching nipples while his fingers keep plunging into my pussy and his thumb keeps rubbing my clit.

He's so damn overwhelming. How am I supposed to stay goddamn sane through this?

The footsteps I heard are getting fainter—thank God, it's someone heading for the other entrance.

"You're so fucking gorgeous," he growls before biting my bottom lip and thrusting his fingers as deep as possible.

My head falls back, and he kisses the length of my throat, sucking at the sensitive skin there. But I can't stop worrying. "What if someone comes out and—"

"What if you're a good girl like I've ordered you to be? What if you come on my fingers just like I fucking want you to? What if you enjoy it so much that you want me to do it again and again?" His thick fingers spread inside me as he presses down on my clit.

I'm panting in his ear now. I groan as he curls his fingers every time he thrusts them into me.

His thumb circles my clit. Fast and determined. I know I'm going to come...

I dig my teeth into his shoulder.

Saint groans in my ear. "Come for me. Stop worrying about anyone else and be greedy. Come on my fingers, baby..."

My core clenches as everything tightens.

My head falls back again.

Every stroke of his fingers claims more of my sanity, more of my pleasure. "Saint," I beg. "Please, I'm..."

"I know you are." But still, he fucks me with his fingers, destroying my willpower and control until I'm whimpering against his mouth.

His eyes meet mine as I squeeze my thighs around his hand.

He manages to grit out one word between his clenched teeth as his hot gaze scorches me. "Come!"

I press my face to his neck and smother the cries that pour from my throat as I come apart around his fingers. My pussy pulses, spreading shudders of pleasure throughout my whole body until I slump against him, clutching onto him just to stay standing.

I hold onto him like this until my vision clears and I'm able to smooth down my dress. His head dips down to kiss me deeply again. And then he takes my hand and leads me back inside the casino.

I huff out a breath. How can he do that? Slip his fingers into me and order me to come, then act as if nothing happened at all?

He's so damn cool, calm, and collected all the time.

Except that I know he isn't.

Because I've just seen a very different side to him...

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CHAPTER TEN

EMERALD

By the end of the week, I still haven't seen Saint again. Was what happened the other day all just because he wanted to check whether my dress was stolen? Or was it actually because he's a little attracted to me...? Honestly, I just don't know what to make of it or him.

As I have a very quick coffee with Jacquetta and Nicki at the casino before my shift starts, I look at my manicure. It's in a complete mess, but I'm too tired by the end of each day to even have the energy to paint my nails. My repetitive handwashing has been a bit out of control lately. I keep telling myself to just focus on the kids. Seeing them looking happier is what keeps me going.

"Have you heard from Saint lately?" I ask Nicki. When I first told Nicki what happened with me thinking Saint was a cop, she'd chuckled and said that he had a dark sense of humor. I'd been intrigued to know how Nicki knew the elusive Saint. She'd explained that her mom's side of the family lived in Philadelphia, and whenever she went to visit them there, Saint would drop in to check how she was doing. Basically, Christian asked Saint to keep an eye on Nicki whenever she was in Philly.

"No. He's gone back to Italy from what I hear."

"How long until he returns to the States?" I don't know what makes me ask this.

“No idea. But from what Christian said, it sounds like work and that it’s an open-ended thing. Last time, he stayed in Italy for a few months.”

My heart dips for some reason. I didn’t expect something like that to happen between us and him to just then disappear. “How well do you know him?” I ask.

She wrinkles her nose. “Not that well. He’s not the type to let anyone in. But like I said, he checks up on me when I’m in Philly, and he has a couple of his men guard me while I’m in his city. He usually takes me out for a catch up over coffee or lunch.” She shrugs. “He knew my brother and father.”

I don’t want to make Nicki sad by talking about her parents, so I change the subject. I tell them I’ve started a distance learning course on bookkeeping. I’m determined to get a better job and improve things for myself and the kids. It may be hard to get a decent job with my surname and my obvious connection to the Imperiosi via my dad, but New York is a big city, and there must be something out there for me.

I can’t help my mind wandering back to what happened with Saint. And exhilaration runs through me as I relive every look and touch he gave me.

But when I reach the part where his fingers snagged the security tag on my dress, a scowl settles on my features. And I tell myself that what happened between us was merely a physical response by my body to his touch. Because that day was just another one of his tricks—making me think he liked me just because he wanted to get up close to check if my dress was stolen.

Yeah, it was just a physical response—nothing more. Because I could never fall for a beautiful liar like Saint Veneti.

* * *

This evening is yet another one of looking at apartments. Seriously, it feels like an actual part-time job now with how much time it’s taking up. And whenever I’m working or out looking at possible places to rent, I have to find a sitter or a friend to help out if the kids aren’t in school. Because there’s no way in hell I’m leaving them around Enzo again if I’m not there to protect them.

This is the fifth building I've been to today. Every other viewing before this has been a bust. Apartments that aren't bigger than a broom cupboard. Buildings that should come with a health warning. Deposits that are too expensive. And this one is even worse than the previous four. I'm exhausted between working, looking at apartments, and looking after the kids, but I'll carry on the search tomorrow. I'm not giving up until I've got the kids a home where they'll feel safe and protected.

Heading home, I pick up the kids from the sitter and get them home and to bed. Once they're all tucked in, I decide to watch some TV and try to unwind. I must have fallen asleep on the couch because the next thing I remember is Enzo and my mom coming home. They're both wasted. Mom goes straight to their bedroom. I haul myself to my feet and head to bed, but Enzo blocks my way. "Make me something to eat," he demands.

The alcohol fumes from his breath wash over me, making me recoil with disgust. "It's late," I murmur. "I need to get to bed. I have to be up early tomorrow. There's a loaf of bread if you want to make some toast for yourself."

"I don't know what makes you act so superior," he snarls. "You're a stuck-up cow just like your sister." He gives an evil smirk. "But I know what would take that little bitch, Milena, down a peg or two."

A shiver rolls down my spine. I know he's still mad about whatever Milena said to him before he slapped her. "What are you talking about, Enzo?"

"She's sixteen, right? That means it's about time a man breaks in that tight pussy of hers. I like my whores as young as I can get them."

Jesus Christ. Revulsion and fear flood through me. I hear a clink. My gaze darts down to see he's already undone his belt. And he starts to walk toward the bedroom where she's sleeping.

Oh my fucking God.

I sprint forward and shove myself in front of him to block his way.

But he pushes me hard, making me stumble into the wall. "Stay out of my way!"

And before I can do anything else, he lashes out at me with his belt.

Pain pierces through me, making me cry out.

He takes another stride toward me and goes to raise the belt again.

But before he can bring it down, I shove him hard.

Stumbling over the edge of the coffee table, he sprawls backward onto the floor and lands with a heavy thud.

He looks dazed, so I take my chance. Running to the room I share with Milena, I see the noise has just woken her up. I snatch her arm. "Come on!" I yell. And I drag her into Jaspar and Giulietta's room. I don't think Enzo will go for either of the youngest kids, but I'm not taking any goddamn chances.

Slamming the door shut and snapping the lock into place, I hear Enzo yelling. "You stupid bitch! You think some flimsy door is gonna keep me from fucking Milena?"

He rattles the door handle, and I hear him slamming his body against the door to force it open. Jaspar and Giulietta wake up. Their eyes dart around in confusion and widen with fear. And Milena's voice is shaking as she tries to comfort them and tell them that everything is going to be okay.

I snatch my phone from my pocket and hit speed-dial to my mom's cell.

"Emerald...?" she mumbles.

"Mom! You've got to stop Enzo. He's trying to break down the door to the kids' room!"

"I'm...sleeping..."

"Mom, did you hear me? He wants to hurt us!"

"For fuck's sake, why are you waking me up? Can't I get any goddamn peace from you kids? What about...what I need?" Her words are disjointed and slurred. "You always want something from me..."

"Mom, did you hear me?"

But the phone goes dead as she hangs up.

"Mom!"

I dial again and hear it ringing in her bedroom. But she doesn't pick up. And then I hear her yell out. "For God's sake, Em! Leave me the hell alone! I'm sleeping..."

Dread races through me as the door looks like it's going to give way, so I haul the dresser in front of it.

The kids are crying now, and I sit huddled with them, tears pouring down my face and praying that Enzo doesn't break the door down. I just need to keep us safe...

* * *

I stare at the key in my palm. The cramped one-bedroom apartment is dingy and has a kitchen that looks like it's at least sixty years old. The linoleum is peeling, cabinet doors are falling off their hinges, and the bedroom has some exposed brick from a patch job gone wrong. But it's mine for now.

The landlord had been all too eager to push it off when I told him I could pay cash upfront for the first month and utilities. Almost all my gold dresses online have sold, except for four which no one bid on, so I'll keep those. The proceeds from the dresses will cover the rent, leaving me with money for food for only the next couple of days, but I'll worry about that later.

I just know that the kids can't spend another day under the same roof as Enzo. Last night was awful. I'm still shaken to the core and in pain from where he struck me. Thank God that the door lock held and kept him out of the bedroom. I shudder to think what would have happened otherwise.

I tried to speak with my mom again this morning, but she was still high from last night and still didn't care. Jesus Christ, how can a mother not freaking care that her complete creep of a boyfriend was planning on forcing her sixteen-year-old daughter? How can a mother not even goddamn care that her kids had to barricade themselves into a bedroom because that was the only way to stay safe? How can she not care that we were all utterly petrified? How could she hang up her phone like that, *just because she wanted to freaking sleep?*

So, this morning, I fought back my tears as I took the first apartment I viewed. Anything has to be better than the kids being around a violent, disgusting creep like Enzo. My new landlord is as sketchy as hell, but I'm desperate, and I know that I'm not going to find anything better on my budget. I look around the place again before locking up.

I just have time to drop back to my mom's place before I start my shift at Casino Venice. I'm quick as I jog up the stairs to our apartment. And no surprise, Mom is sprawled on the couch and out of it.

"I found an apartment."

She looks at me and nods. "Okay."

I hate it when she's checked out like this. She's not the only one who lost someone the day my dad was killed. She's not the only one who has to live with what happened. "The kids need somewhere to sleep," I grit out. "So, I'll need the furniture from our bedrooms and some sheets and towels. And we'll need some plates and stuff."

“Sure.”

“Here’s the address.” I hand her a small piece of paper. Maybe it’s not the best idea given what Enzo is like, but it just feels wrong for her to not even know where the kids are living.

But she merely tosses the paper aside.

And I leave before I break down in tears.

My shift passes in a blur.

Later that day, the reality of everything sinks into me like a dead weight as I sit in the middle of the barren living room, staring blankly at the walls.

There’s a folding dining table, a cramped kitchenette with a microwave and toaster, and a sofa-bed which is where I’ll be sleeping so that the kids can have the only bedroom. The TV has a DVD player sitting beneath it like it’s the year 2000, and apart from those things, there are very few homey items like blankets and pillows. But it will have to do for now.

I fiddle with my bracelet. *Click, click, click, click.* But even that’s not enough to soothe me like it normally does. All through my shift, I kept going over the numbers. It’s going to be really difficult to keep this place on what I earn, but we need it. My siblings need love. They need a home. Tears burn my eyes as I hug my knees, and they start to trickle down my cheeks. Soon the trickle turns into a flood, and then the flood turns into outright ugly sobbing.

How did my life become such a total mess? My boyfriend dumped me after completely humiliating me and telling me that I’ve let myself go, my mom doesn’t care if we are safe or where we live, and I’m living in a tiny apartment which I know I’m going to struggle to afford.

I swipe my eyes to get rid of the tears because the kids will be here soon. *They can’t see me fall apart like this. Just focus on the positive, Em. The kids will be safe now, and I can work the rest of it out later. Don’t let the kids see you stressing out over the money situation. You don’t want to worry them. Pretend that everything’s okay now. Just smile when you see them.*

I square my shoulders, eyeing my phone on the counter where I left it as I set up the bedroom. I lift myself up and grab my phone, scrolling to the chess site. There are invitations to a few matches waiting for my acceptance. I chew my lip and accept all of them. They’re all slotted one after another. The payout isn’t great. Ten dollars usually; sometimes, even

twenty dollars. But I need the money to buy food for us. Every cent counts...because I'm desperate now.

* * *

Jacquetta has noticed that I've been down in the dumps and suggests setting me up with a colleague of a friend. The first question I ask is whether he's Imperiosi, but she says no. Then she offers to babysit and presses me to go, so I decide to say yes to give me a distraction from my problems. I mean, he can't be any worse than the guy who dumped me in front of all my friends, right?

The guy, Chase, rings me and suggests taking me to a fancy French restaurant. I pick out a dress and get ready, taking extra time to put on my make up and do my hair. Jacquetta is going to keep an eye on the kids for me and has told me to focus on enjoying myself.

I meet Chase at the restaurant, and once we're there, conversation flows easily, and I find I'm enjoying myself. He's handsome, sexy, and charming.

"Do you live by yourself?" he asks as we start our entrée.

I shake my head, picking up my glass to take a sip of the wine he ordered for us. "I look after my three younger siblings, so they live with me."

His brow creases. "So, you still live with your parents?"

"No. My dad passed away a few years ago. And my mom isn't able to look after them right now, so that's why the kids have moved into an apartment with me. They're great kids." I flash him a smile. "They're sixteen, six, and five."

His face blanches. "You're a *single mom*?"

"Well, technically, I'm their sister." But I guess the set-up is the same as if I were a single mom.

He tosses his linen napkin onto the table as he shoves back his chair. "No man in their right mind would want to date a woman who's got three screaming brats at home. I can't believe that you didn't bother to mention that."

Indignation starts to swirl within me. "You never asked. If you had, I would have gladly told you, just like I'm telling you right now. I haven't been trying to keep it a secret. I didn't realize it would be such an issue."

“Of course, it’s a fucking issue,” he snaps. “I’m here to get away from a nagging wife and my own two whining kids!”

My fork clatters to the table. “Wife? *You’re married?*”

“You women are all the same. Desperate to get your claws into any man, so that he’ll be a meal ticket for you and your brats.”

People are looking at us now, and my face flushes when he says this. “I think it’s way worse when a man *deliberately* forgets to mention that he has a wife and that he’s a cheater,” I retort, my true thoughts spilling out. “And I’m not after your money. I have a job and can support myself.”

He stalks off, and I console myself by gulping down the rest of my wine. I sink my head into my hands. Jacquetta obviously doesn’t know that he’s married, and it’s not her fault that he’s a complete liar and scumbag.

As I leave, I think this evening can’t get any worse, but the waiter hurries up with the bill which Chase left for me to pay. Two hundred dollars for a bottle of wine and two entrées? Yeah, he’s definitely a scumbag, and I feel like crying as I put it on my credit card. I wonder how on earth I’m going to have enough money this month to pay all the bills, and I know that I’ll need to pick up as many chess games as possible.

But then I tell myself to just focus on how well I’ve been doing, supporting myself and my siblings. I’ve taken on two extra jobs, working mornings at a florist and afternoons at a restaurant, leaving my evenings free to work at the casino. Milena also has a part-time job now, and she helps to look after the little ones when she can, or I’m swapping childcare favors with Addison. I’m just about managing to keep on top of things. Although it’s still tricky because Ria Gioberti’s cousin, Ramona, is a supervisor at the casino and draws up the staff rotas. And despite me asking for only evening shifts and lowering myself to practically beg her, Ramona takes great delight in making things difficult for me. I’ve no doubt that Ria’s influence is behind her cousin’s mean girl tactics. Even though Ria has Ronnie, she still hates my guts.

So, things are far from easy, but the fact the kids are happy means the absolute world to me. I already swore off dating made men after the Ronnie thing, and after this date with Chase, I’m done with dating all men—for at least a while. I just want to focus on myself and the kids.

But this plan isn’t meant to be...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

EMERALD

I'm trying to get my mom to go to rehab. One of the girls I work with told me that I should be stronger and just walk away from my mom. But I don't see encouraging her to go to rehab as me being weak.

Because I'm definitely not being weak when it comes to improving things for myself and the kids. I'm not still living with our mom, just hoping that she'll get better by herself. Instead, I found a new place for us to live and am trying my damn hardest to make a decent life for us all.

And I want my mom to get better if she can, especially for the sake of Jaspar and Giulietta—although I'm not sure there'll ever be a time when they'll be able to go back and live with her again. And that's totally okay because their home is with me for as long as they need me. I'm never going to let them down, and I'm going to make sure I'm always around for them.

* * *

It's the funeral of an Imperiosi wife today. She was a family friend, but my mom isn't able to make it, so I'm attending in her place.

We're back at the family's mansion now for refreshments, and everyone is outside, but I've got the start of a headache. I wince, rubbing my forehead, trying to massage away the ache. It doesn't work, and I decide I need an Advil.

Weaving through the crowd of people until I reach the door that leads inside, I head straight for the kitchen. I sigh as I feel the cool of the interior. The sunshine outside is too bright, and I much prefer the dimmed lighting in here.

I move to the kitchen cabinets but can't find what I'm looking for. With a sigh, I head upstairs to the bathroom. They are bound to have some Advil in there. Opening the cabinet above the basin, I spot the familiar white bottle with its bright label on the top shelf.

Stretching on my toes, I manage to grasp it and pull it down. Opening it, the cap resists for a moment, then pops with a satisfying click. I shake out two pills into my palm and grab a glass from the counter which I fill from the tap. I swallow the pills quickly, chasing them with a long drink of cool, soothing water.

I put the glass down and lean against the counter, closing my eyes for a moment. I take a few deep breaths, hoping the painkillers kick in soon.

When the ache starts to dull a little, I make my way downstairs. As I walk back through the deserted kitchen, I run into Calcedonio Cicconi. He's an underboss, and I don't know him well, but I've seen him around the casino a lot.

"Well, well, well." He takes a couple of steps toward me. "Looks like we have a lost little lamb here."

"I'm not lost," I say as I look away from him quickly.

He takes a swig from the beer bottle he holds in his hand. "It's not safe for a pretty girl like you to be here all alone."

I take a deep swallow and take a cautious step around him. I should be safe here, but drunk men can be volatile, so I know I have to tread carefully.

Calcedonio is much bigger than I am, standing at over six foot and stacked with muscle. My eyes are drawn to the scar across his temple that's like a signal for the danger that's within him. I'm not sure what he's capable of—and I don't want to find out.

I just need to get back outside as quickly as I can without provoking him.

I step around him, keeping as much distance between us as possible.

But his hand shoots out and snatches my arm.

Disgust floods through me at his mere touch.

"What's the rush?" He's too close to me, his huge hand clamped around my arm.

I try to leap away from him.

But he's too quick for me. "I'm sure that your slut of a mother taught you better manners than to walk away when someone's talking to you."

My heart hammers in my chest as my gaze darts between him and the door that's my escape route...

He yanks me closer to him. "There's something about fear that I love so much." His hand moves dangerously close to my breasts.

"Get away from me!" I jerk away from him and make a run for it.

"I'm so sick of you fucking whores playing hard to get," his angry voice growls from behind me. "You flirt and tease, and you think you can do whatever you want without consequences."

He grabs me and shoves me up against the wall.

"Why don't you just pretend I'm Ronnie, huh? Or how about Saint? I've seen the way he looks at you. I can make you feel way better than he ever could."

I hit him as hard as I can.

"I may not be as rich as some of them, but my dick is big and can give you just as good a ride. And *gold diggers* like you don't care as long as there's ten bucks in it for you at the end, right...?"

My blow against his chest barely affects him.

"I like it rough," he snarls. "I won't mind if you scream..."

He fists my locks in a tight grasp to keep me from moving.

His other hand takes his gun from his waistband and puts it on the counter with a thud before starting to unbuckle his belt.

"You know, your mom doesn't fight this hard."

I might be able to reach the gun...

Because I'm not just taking this lying down. I'm fed up of men thinking it's okay to treat me or even Milena like this because of my family's reputation. I'm freaking determined to break this cycle, and I need to send a clear message.

"Be a fucking good slut and—"

I snatch it and aim it toward him.

Pop!

"Fuck!" he screams.

He staggers back as the blood pours from his hand.

Saint comes running into the kitchen, followed by a couple of the other men. They must have heard the shot. His head flicking between Calcedonio

and me, he tells the other guys he'll handle it. "Leave! I've got this."

Calcedonio takes another step toward me.

"Get away from her," Saint hisses in a dark tone.

"Ah, come on now," Calcedonio sneers. "We can share, right? I'm sure she won't charge us double. Sluts like her love double penetration, right?"

"Get the fuck out. Right now. Before I end your miserable little life!" Saint bellows as he reaches for his gun.

Calcedonio's gaze flickers as he realizes he's skating on extremely thin ice now. "Stupid bitch," he spits out between his pathetic whimpers as he grasps his bloody hand and hobbles back outside.

I put the gun back down.

"What happened?" Saint asks.

"It was, um, nothing." I don't want to admit what he said to me or tried to do. It's just too humiliating. First Enzo and now Calcedonio. My dad taught me how to shoot a gun, and I'm so freaking thankful for that right now. I'm pretty good at it, and I practice my skills from time to time at the shooting range. When Anni Marchiano—Christian's sister—is in town, we often go and practice together because she's a good shot as well. Although, I don't think her arranged husband was exactly thrilled when he discovered what she could do with a gun.

"You're a bad liar, Emerald. You don't shoot someone for no reason."

I go to walk away. I know I'm hopeless at telling lies, but I just can't talk about how Calcedonio thought I was a whore.

"Wait!" He catches my arm. "What's wrong with your dress?" He skims his thumb over a rip on the sleeve of my dress, a shiver rippling through me as he touches my bare skin. "Did Calcedonio do this?"

I avert my gaze from him, hoping he won't see the truth in my eyes. "No." It's totally embarrassing admitting that men see me as an easy target because of my family name.

He clenches his jaw.

"I took care of it and got away from him," I say quickly.

"What exactly did he say to you?"

The silence beats between us, and I can tell he's not going to leave it alone until he gets an answer from me. "He called me a whore." I flick my hair over my shoulder, trying to appear strong, although I'm actually pretty shaken.

His eyes narrow. "And then the fucker put his filthy hands on you?"

I press my lips together and don't answer, but the look on my face must give me away.

Before I can say anything else, he strides off.

I follow him. "You don't need to say anything to him." I speak quickly. "I've made sure he won't ever try anything like that again on me..."

But as soon as we're back outside, his eyes zero in on Calcedonio who's clutching his injured hand and talking with his brother, anger evident on his face.

My gaze darts around, trying to find Christian, because I have a bad feeling that Saint is about to show his volatile side.

But Christian's nowhere to be seen. Shit.

And without another word, Saint charges toward Calcedonio and punches him in the face. "Don't you dare lay a hand on Emerald ever again!"

"I don't know why you're defending her," Calcedonio splutters as he staggers backward. "So what if I tried to get in her panties? Emerald Fiorelli is nothing but a stupid slut just like her ma."

Saint raises his gun. Pop! Pop!

But one of Calcedonio's soldiers gets in the way and gets hit instead, falling back into the pool with a strangled sound and clutching at his neck.

Women start screaming. The men automatically reach for their weapons.

Calcedonio charges at Saint, but Saint punches him again and shoves him into the pool.

Calcedonio grabs him as he falls, pulling Saint into the pool with him with a huge splash.

Gasps and shrieks sound all around us. I'm rooted to the spot as I watch the men fight as they grapple with each other in the water, throwing punches wherever they can.

But Saint has the advantage. He's not drunk, not injured, plus he's a better fighter. And he quickly beats Calcedonio into submission. And then he pulls a knife out and stabs him.

There are more strangled screams from the women in the crowd. But all I can do is stand there open-mouthed at the scene in front of me.

Eventually, Saint hauls himself out of the pool, leaving the two lifeless forms in there. Blood is pouring out of them both, making the pool turn into a sea of red around them.

Saint straightens his soaking suit as he strides past me.

Christian comes sprinting out of the mansion with his gun drawn. “What the hell’s going on?” And seeing Saint dripping water everywhere as his expensive handmade shoes squelch with every step he takes, he glares at him. “You choose now to go for a fucking swim, Saint?”

Saint merely scowls back at his Capo.

Christian catches sight of the dead bodies in the pool. “For fuck’s sake, Saint, in case you’ve forgotten, this is supposed to be a fucking funeral!”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

EMERALD

Christian has summoned me to his office. He knows why I shot Calcedonio in the hand, and I know he doesn't blame me after that awful man tried to rape me, so I'm not sure what he wants to talk about today. I know Saint ended up killing Calcedonio, but Christian can't blame me for that, right?

"Emerald, I have serious concerns for your safety, especially after Calcedonio tried to attack you at the funeral."

I don't know where Christian's going with this, but I get the feeling that I'm not going to like it.

"Unfortunately, your family's reputation makes you a target in the eyes of assholes like that. And what worries me even more is Calcedonio's brother, Carmine." Carmine is another underboss. "Carmine is furious about what happened to his brother and is hellbent on revenge. I've warned him to stay away from you, but he's a crazy bastard who's volatile and unpredictable. You're not safe with Carmine out there."

Holy crap. "I can take care of myself." I try to sound brave, but I can't help the slight break in my voice.

"No, you can't." Christian clenches his jaw. "And you need to take this seriously because the danger to you is pretty significant."

"Are the children in danger?" I whisper.

He shakes his head. "He doesn't go after kids. At least we know that they'll stay safe. I'm one hundred percent certain about that."

I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding.

Christian spears me with his gaze. "So, here's what's going to happen. *You're going to marry one of my men.*"

I shake my head. "Uh, that's very kind of you to offer, but no, thank you. I'll be okay. I'm fine as I am."

"This is the only way I can protect you. And I *will* protect you. I'm responsible for what happened to you at an Imperiosi funeral and at the hands of one of my underbosses, and I won't run the risk of anything else happening to you."

No, no, no. No way. I mean, who's really going to want to marry someone with my family background? They'll only be doing it because Christian tells them to. Made men are not exactly known for their fidelity, and I'm definitely not taking the risk of ending up with someone who treats me badly.

"Piero has agreed to marry you."

My face falls. "Jeez, Christian, he's ancient. He must be at least eighty-five."

Christian pierces me with a hard look. "He's forty-four."

Uh, okay, so the age argument isn't going to get me out of this. And I know what Christian really means is that if I'm with Piero, people won't dare call me a whore. Without me even realizing it, my fingers automatically reach for my bracelet, clicking it open and shut, seeking some comfort in the repetitive motion and soothing sound. In his own way, Christian's trying to help me, but I'm definitely not risking marrying someone I don't really know, especially as I now also have responsibility for the kids. We already went through so much crap with my mom's boyfriend, and I don't want to take any more chances.

All I want is someone who'll love me for who I am—is that really too much to ask?

* * *

Returning to the apartment, I know that I can't marry Piero. But I'm also not safe while Carmine Cicconi is intent on getting revenge against me.

Which doesn't leave me with many options.

I know Christian said the kids are safe, but what if Carmine targets me when they're with me? That would put them in danger too. I can't risk the kids getting hurt because of Carmine being after me. The whole point of them living with me was to keep them safe because they weren't safe with our mom.

It doesn't take me long to work out what I need to do.

When the kids get home from school, I tell them that an old friend in San Diego had a fall and needs me to go and take care of her for a little while until she gets back onto her feet. I cross my fingers behind my back while I tell them this, hoping they believe me because I'm hopeless at telling convincing lies.

"Can we come too?" Giulietta asks. "It'll be like a family vacation!"

"I wish you could come, sweetie," I say, really meaning it. "But you've got school. And she'll have lots of medical appointments, so it won't really be like a vacation." Her shoulders slump with disappointment, and I feel fury race through me at the whole situation. "Jacquetta and her family will take care of you until I'm back. It's only for a little while." And her face brightens as soon as she hears that she'll be staying with Jacquetta.

Ten minutes later, I'm stuffing clothes into a duffle bag.

"Em?"

My head snaps to the door, where Milena stands with a backpack over her shoulder.

"I'm almost ready. Can you check and see if the kids have everything they need?"

She nods, and as she goes to find them, I toss another random selection of clothes into the bag before I zip it up. Slinging it over my shoulder, I go downstairs to the others, plastering on a sunny smile.

"Let's roll out, guys." I usher them out the door and swiftly lock it behind us. The sound of a car door slamming on the street makes me jump, bumping into Milena.

My hands shake as I toss the bags into the back of the Uber. I'm gripping my purse so hard that I'm certain I'm going to break a finger. But I'll be damned if I let my siblings get caught in the goddamn crossfire of this whole mess.

The drive is tense, and my leg bounces with every stop light until we reach Jacquetta's home. Jacquetta and her twin, Quin, come out to greet us and take the kids' bags.

I give them both a hug and thank them for helping out. “Thanks guys. You’re the best, really.” I know the kids will be safe with them because Jacquetta’s whole family are Imperiosi and they have amazing security.

With a longer hug to all three of my siblings, I will my voice to stay even. “You guys have fun, okay?”

“Okay!” the younger two yell, excited at the thought of staying with Jacquetta. They all absolutely love her.

“Milena, try to make sure you all go to bed on time please. You’ll be too tired for school if you stay up as late as you always want to.”

“Got it, Mom.” She rolls her eyes a little, but I smile, tugging them all back into another hug.

“I’ll be back soon, okay?” I hate keeping secrets from them.

My next stop is the bus station, and being alone now only serves to fray my nerves more.

I scan the list of destinations and settle on the one furthest away leaving in the next hour. Springfield, Illinois. Perfect. Once I get to Springfield, I’ll figure out my next step from there.

I pay cash for everything. The ticket, the bottle of water, and the bag of pretzels. I don’t want anyone tracking me via my bank cards.

Forty minutes later, I board the bus. Tugging my hood over my head, I sink into the uncomfortably stiff seat. I’m exhausted.

The sound of a car backfiring makes me jump. I scan the bus again, making a mental note of who else is on board. At least there’s no one who looks like they’re here to off me.

My head leaning against the glass, I let out a sigh as the bus finally pulls out. And after a long while, the busy New York traffic fades into nothing but the interstate.

The silence in the bus provides the perfect backdrop for my thoughts to run wild. What if Carmine finds me? What if he has people in Illinois? What if my photo is being handed to the hitman as we speak?

My leg bounces faster as my thoughts spin. I don’t have a lot of cash to burn through. I didn’t want to withdraw any cash before I left in case it alerted anyone about my imminent departure. I have to be smart. One night in Springfield, then I move. It’s the only way to do this.

How my life got so twisted like this, I don’t know.

I squeeze my eyes shut, my fist tightening more. The tears burn my eyes. My life is a mess, and I should have known it was only a matter of

time before everything around me would crash and burn.

* * *

Almost a day later, I watch as the bus pulls into the station. Weary with exhaustion, I lift my chin and sling my bag over my shoulder. I have to keep going. If I stop, I'm as good as dead, and I won't let that happen.

Slipping off the bus, I melt into the crowd, keeping my head down.

One step at a time.

I can do this being on the run thing.

I have to do it. Because I'm not freaking dying over some jerk who couldn't keep his hands to himself. I'm not dying and leaving those three kids behind and all alone...

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

S AINT

My phone buzzes in my pocket, but I ignore it. It's fucking Christian. He can go fuck himself. I've been raging since I found out he wants Emerald to marry Piero.

I push from the wall and go out to my car. A hand drags through my hair, messing up the already mussed up strands.

I pull out a cigarette and my lighter, but my phone starts vibrating again with Christian's name flashing up. "What?" I snap into it as I flick the lighter.

"Where are you?"

"Out."

"Well, get back. We need to talk."

"I'm busy." I suck the smoke into my lungs, letting the familiar sensation ease the tight muscles of my body. "Can't it wait?" I grit out.

"No."

"Christian—"

"Get back to the casino, Saint."

There's no room to argue. I don't even give a reply before I hang up and slide into the driver's seat. I don't even waste time greeting anyone as I march through the lobby and past the doors until I hit Christian's office.

The men stationed outside raise a brow, but I ignore them as I barge past.

“What?” I bark at Christian.

“Sit.”

My hand flexes at my side, but I follow the order, breathing out my frustration into a terse huff.

“I need you to find Emerald.”

“What for? To drag her to the altar to marry Piero? I thought you had that all under control.”

“She’s left town.”

I lean forward, my elbows braced on my knees. “What do you mean?”

“Carmine’s still hellbent on revenge against Emerald. He thinks if it wasn’t for her, his brother would still be alive. We need to track her down and get her to safety before he can hurt her. It’s only a matter of time before someone does the hit. None of our Imperiosi guys would dare go against me and do it, but he’s put it out among some contractors. And it’s a hefty price tag.” Christian pauses, dragging a hand down his face.

I don’t even acknowledge that the news rattles me—because that would mean that I have a heart. And as far as Christian’s concerned, I’m as coldhearted as they come.

He sighs heavily. “Seems like she’s run off somewhere. Left the kids with Jacquetta for now. She told her that the kids would be much safer if she wasn’t around for a while. You’d think that Carmine would also be coming after you as you were also involved in the whole Calcedonio situation at the funeral, but he’s obviously decided to go for the easier target instead.”

“Fucking coward,” I growl, no longer able to contain myself. “We’d know if Carmine already got to her. He’d be boasting about it from the rooftops.”

“I know. Which means she must still be alive. But for how long, I don’t know. That’s why you need to find her.”

“Why me?”

His eyes settle on my face. “Because you’re the best. And Jacquetta is going out of her mind with worry over Emerald.”

My hand wraps around the edge of the armrest to keep my composure. “What’s in it for me? This isn’t my usual sort of assignment. Look, Christian, I’ve told you before that I’m not a goddamn babysitter or bodyguard or whatever else you want me to be. I’m here to track down and kill the traitor in the business, and that’s it.”

“I consider her to be practically family, so we need to protect her. Jacquetta would never forgive me if something happens to Emerald.”

He’s not letting this go. I mull it over in my mind, but it doesn’t take me long to come up with a plan. “If I help you find her, what’s in it for me?”

“For fuck's sake, Saint.” He pinches the bridge of his nose.

“It’s a fair ask, Christian, since you have me running around the damn city still fixing our other problem. This is going to take me away from that.”

“Why does it have to be for something?”

My brow arches. I’m going to track her down anyway—because there’s no way anyone but me is going to touch Emerald. But he doesn’t need to know that. If I play my cards right, I’m going to get everything I fucking want. “What’s it worth to you, Christian?”

His jaw flexes, and I’m almost certain he’s contemplating whether reaching across the desk to throttle me is worth the risk or not. One heartbeat, then another, and he sighs. “What do you want?”

I bite back the smirk. It’s like clockwork. I won’t tell him that he’s a bit too easy to manipulate. I’m playing on the fact that I know him too well. That I know how much he cares about Jacquetta but also about Emerald. I’m a bastard, and I know it, but I don’t care.

“Just tell me what you want,” he sighs.

“Emerald.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

S AINT

The single word slips past my lips without hesitation.

Christian's eyes narrow, and he shakes his head. "Not happening."

"Then find someone else." I start to shove up from my chair.

"Sit. Down."

I pause, hovering just off the chair, meeting his gaze. The emotion that flickers in his eyes has me lowering back down. The silence stretches between us, pregnant and heavy.

"You want to marry her?" he asks in an incredulous tone.

"Yeah." As an Imperiosi member, I have to ask the Capo's permission before I marry someone.

"For fuck's sake, Saint. I thought there was nothing going on between the pair of you."

I just stare at him. I don't owe him any explanations when it comes to my personal life.

"Do you really think you can have a real relationship, Saint?"

"Yeah."

"But with someone like her? She's a lot to handle, you know."

"I can handle her just fine," I grit out.

He gives me a hard look and shakes his head. "Fine," he clips. "You can have her. But only if she agrees to marry you."

“She’ll agree because it’ll keep her safe,” I reply. I shove up from the chair once more, hands stuffed into my pockets as I turn to the door.

“Saint.”

I’m mid-step when I stop, turning my head toward him.

“Just promise me you’ll find her before Carmine does.”

I give a silent nod and then walk to the door silently.

And once I’m away from him, the corner of my lip tugs up. That fucking worked. But he didn’t need to make me promise to find her. Because it’s not a promise. It’s a fucking guarantee.

* * *

I’m pissed.

I roll my shoulders to try and lessen some of the tension, but it’s futile. My hand smacks into the wall outside the apartment building where one of her friends lives. Emerald’s nowhere to be found, no matter where I look.

I’m agitated. I’m livid. No one is around to see the lapse, but that doesn’t make it better.

I want Emerald Fiorelli. I knew the moment I kissed her that there was no going back. There was no pretending. She’s fucking mine.

But tracking her down is a lot harder than I thought it would be.

I’ve always known that she’s a smart girl, and this just goes to prove it. Staying hidden is pretty hard when you’re up against someone like me who has limitless resources. But whatever approach I take, I’m no nearer to finding her.

She’s disappeared off the face of the earth according to airline passenger manifestos, phone records, bank records, and every other database I’ve hacked into.

Where the hell is she?

I press my head to my forearm, leaning against the wall. It’s been weeks since I started looking for her, but she’s like a ghost. Gone...

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EMERALD

It feels like fall is rushing in. There's a coolness in the air signifying the end of summer, and the leaves on the trees are a beautiful haze of reds and oranges. I sit in my shabby motel room in a small town in Illinois, looking at the awful orange walls—a throwback to the seventies—which is probably the last time this place was painted.

I still haven't managed to find a job. I didn't think it would be as hard as this. I mean, I'm well-presented and I've got experience. I've already used up all the money I brought with me because I've only had the cash that was in my purse. I can't risk using my bank cards in case Carmine uses them to track me down.

I've been making money for the last week by playing chess games in the park for money. The old guys are always up for a little wager, and I think I manage to brighten up their days and bring a little glamor to their games.

Getting dressed in one of my shimmery dresses, I head out to get something to eat. While I'm out, I see a sign in the window of a small pet supplies store advertising a job vacancy.

Tottering into the shop, I shoot a beaming smile at the old lady who looks like she's the owner. She's surrounded by seven cats. "Hi. I'm Emerald."

"Hello, dear. I'm Winifred. How can I help you?"

“I want to apply for the job please,” I announce.

She runs her gaze over my sparkly dress and ridiculously high heels. I’m not very good at packing in a hurry and just grabbed the first things that came to hand to take with me. “Er, really?”

“Yes, really. I need the money.”

“Have you worked in a pet store before, dear?”

“No. But I’ve worked in a casino.”

Winifred looks me over. “Do you have any, um, more casual clothes?”

“No.” But that shouldn’t be a problem because my dresses are more than presentable.

“I’m not sure you’re the sort of person I’m looking for.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, that outfit...”

I look down at my dress. It was one of my best steals last month—two hundred dollars’ worth of pure glittering sequins. “Are you saying that you don’t like it?” My voice dips in disappointment.

“No, dear, it’s not that,” she says quickly. “It’s just people come in with their pets, and the pets often get excited, especially the doggies. And they’re always jumping up onto people. Your clothes would get ruined in no time. And you wouldn’t want to ruin your beautiful expensive dresses, would you?”

I wave a hand. “It doesn’t matter if it gets ruined. I’ll just get a new one.”

Her brow wrinkles. “I’m not sure that the salary I pay would enable you to buy such expensive clothes...”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ve got a very generous boyfriend.”

“Oh, is it someone local? I might know him. After all, I’ve lived here all my life and know just about everyone.”

“No, he’s...um...new in town. His name’s McKinley.” I cross my fingers behind my back.

“McKinley? That’s the name of the biggest department store in town. What a coincidence!”

“Yes, what a coincidence.” A strained laugh leaves my lips. “So, what about the job?” She still doesn’t look convinced. “I’m a hard worker. If you give me a trial for a week, I’ll prove it to you. Please?”

She sighs. “Well, I do need help around the place. My arthritis has been playing up something terrible...”

“Great!” I trill. “I can start tomorrow morning.”

Her expression drops with disappointment. “You can’t start right away?”

“I would if I could, but I have a prior engagement,” I say with a regretful smile. And after I agree with her to start tomorrow at 9 a.m., I head straight to the store to go shoplifting for a new dress for my first day at work. Because I really should make an effort to look my best, right?

* * *

Standing in McKinley’s department store, my pulse starts racing as I take in the sight of the dresses on the second floor. Silk, satin, and sequins shimmer under the bright lights, all ripe to be lifted by my French-tipped fingers. I know I shouldn’t be doing this. My stealing has been out of control since I left New York. My stress levels are through the roof, and stealing is one of the only things that manages to soothe me. I know God is going to send me to hell for all my sins, but I just don’t know how to stop stealing...

I take my time, running my hands over the luxurious fabrics. I decide on a silk number in a shade called *Sunset Serendipity*, and slipping it off the hanger, I stuff it into my capacious purse.

I really should be buying more casual clothes for the job and to help me keep a low profile around the town, but there’s something about sparkly dresses that always draws me in.

A dress in a shade of pale pink catches my eye next—it would be perfect for Winifred. She did look a little underdressed in her plain dress and apron. Just because she’s old, it doesn’t mean that she shouldn’t look fabulous.

I’m about to grab the pink dress when I see an assistant tracking me with her beady eyes. *Uh oh*. And I decide to leave before anyone stops me and demands to search my bag.

* * *

Maybe people wouldn’t guess it, but it turns out that I was made for working in a pet store.

All the animals that come in absolutely love me. And all the pet owners have told Winifred that they love my sunny smile and welcoming manner. Winifred even finds a chair to put behind the cash register after I tell her how hard it is standing all day in my extremely high heels. It really is the perfect job for me.

We're in the back room one afternoon. I've just made us a pot of tea, and I'm setting out on a plate the cream cakes I bought from the bakery down the street.

Winifred's oldest cat, Hector, jumps up onto my lap and drags his claws along the sequins on my dress. "I wore this dress today especially for you because I know how much you adore sequins," I coo at him as he rubs his fluffy head against my hand. Then I let him lick a tiny bit of cream off my finger, and he rewards me with a deep rumbling purr.

"I have to say, you've been such a success with all the customers." Winifred smiles at me. "Business is really up since you started working here. And I do love this pink dress you got me." She smooths the luxurious fabric across her lap. "Are you sure your boyfriend didn't mind paying for it?"

I beam at her. "McKinley didn't, er, mind at all. He loves letting me spend his fortune."

"But he also paid for all those other dresses for me—the blue dress, the yellow dress, the green dress, and the mauve dress," Winifred replies. "He really is much too generous."

I give a small dismissive wave. "Think nothing of it."

"You really must bring McKinley in to meet me, so that I can thank him in person."

"He's, er, a bit busy right now, but maybe in a couple of weeks, okay?" Oh God, I feel terrible for lying to her, especially after she took a chance on me and gave me this job.

"That would be lovely," she says in her sweet voice, and I smile back at her.

Life is pretty good for me here. That is, everything except for not being with the kids. My heart feels like it's going to splinter in two whenever I think about them, and I've cried myself to sleep more than once. And my repetitive handwashing is through the roof.

But at least I know they're safe—and that has to be the priority right now.

Because if anything ever happened to them, I'd never be able to forgive myself...

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

S AINT

I drum my fingers on the desk in front of me as I stare at my laptop. She must have run out of money by now—she didn't withdraw any money before she left and hasn't touched her bank account since.

Where is she getting money to live on? She must have found a job. She's most likely to have got a job in a casino, given that's the only experience she has. But there's hundreds of casinos over the country, and she could be in any one of them.

I access a back door to the IRS computer system, but my search shows no new employer or new information for Emerald Fiorelli.

I exhale in frustration. How else could she be earning money? What else is she good at...?

And then I have a brainwave.

* * *

I'm not sure if I've found her, but I'm going to drive to the town where I have a lead. It's an area where there's been a string of dress thefts from department stores and boutiques. It may be nothing, but I know I have to check it out.

But if it is her, I might just have to kill her after all the worry she's caused me.

Arriving in a small sleepy town, I wrinkle my nose. This isn't the sort of town I'd imagine Emerald being in. There definitely aren't any casinos here, and it doesn't have any of the glamor of New York.

After getting myself a coffee, I start casually asking questions as I wander around the town. Have there been any new arrivals recently? In particular, has anyone seen a beautiful woman with inky black hair and mesmerizing green eyes?

The only response I get is from a couple of people saying that there's a new woman in town who's working in the pet store. I sigh heavily. That won't be Emerald. That doesn't sound like her at all, and I can't see a pet store owner considering someone like Emerald as being a suitable candidate for a job in their store. I'm imagining the store must be frequented by old dears who are buying bows and treats for their precious dogs and cats—and there's absolutely no way Emerald would ruin her clothes by working around animals.

Nevertheless, I decide to check it out before giving up on this town and going back to the drawing board.

Walking into *Winifred's Pet Supplies*, my suspicions about this being a quaint little store are immediately confirmed. The owner looks to be in her seventies, and the youngest customer looks to be at least sixty-five. The customers all have various pets with them who are either yapping or meowing away. It's like a fucking zoo in here.

The old lady behind the counter is wearing a very glamorous blue dress which looks rather out of place in the pet shop. "Can I help you, dear?" she says.

"Yeah." I gingerly step around a cat who has alarmingly sharp claws. "I heard you have a new employee here—a woman who recently arrived in town."

"That's correct. You must be her boyfriend, McKinley!"

I have no idea what she's talking about, but this woman definitely doesn't sound like Emerald. Because Emerald is on the run and will be too busy to think about snaring a new boyfriend, so I know I've struck out.

I'm about to give up and walk out of the store when I halt in my tracks as I hear something going on in the back room. "Hector, stop pawing at my dress!"

And I charge into that back room as soon as I hear Emerald's voice—heading straight for Hector so that I can tell the asshole to take his fucking

filthy hands off of her—and I find Emerald sitting in a cozy armchair with her high-heeled feet on a foot stool, drinking tea from a dainty antique teacup while a cat snuggles up on her lap. As she looks at the animal and strokes his fur, a full-wattage smile is on her face, and I realize how much I've missed seeing it.

“Aren't you supposed to be working?” I grit out, irrationally annoyed because she certainly doesn't look to be in any real trouble which warrants all the time I've spent tracking her down. If anything, she looks to be rather too goddamn comfortable in the new life she's found for herself.

Her face falls. “Valentino, um, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

I close the door behind me. “Carmine wants you dead. You're not safe here. I've come to take you back to New York.”

She shakes her head. “You've just said yourself that Carmine is after me. New York isn't safe for me anymore. It's better that I stay hidden here.”

“Look, we can't talk about it here. It's too open. Tell me where you're staying, and I'll come by after work.”

Her lips remain resolutely shut.

“Don't try me, Emerald. Not after the job I've had hunting you down. If you don't want me to make a scene here, then tell me where the hell you're staying.”

Her gaze flickers, and I can tell she doesn't want me causing trouble for Winifred or her business. “Fine.” And she tells me the name of the place she's staying.

I want to hug her and strangle her at the same time. Because how she managed to get four fucking states away and set up a new life in so little time is as impressive as it's aggravating.

* * *

When it's early evening, I drive to Emerald's motel. I knock on the motel room door, and Emerald opens it wearing an oversized T-shirt and little cotton shorts I can barely see. Lust flares in my belly, threatening to drag me into ecstasy just at the sight of her.

She lets me in and shuts the door behind me. I open my mouth and brace myself for a battle.

But before I can get a word in, she shoves me against the wall and kisses me hard.

I groan and melt against her as she fists my shirt in her hands, desperate to have me the way she needs me. And when she sucks my tongue, I know I'm fucked.

There's no way I can deny her when she's so damn eager. And she's getting everything tonight—I'm making damn sure of that. I grip her tee and jerk it off her, revealing her perfect tits.

I undo a couple of buttons on my own shirt before hauling it over my head. Emerald watches me before taking a step back and dropping her little shorts, revealing every inch of her naked body. "I want you," she rasps.

"Do you?"

She nods and tugs me closer by the loops on my jeans. She undoes the button and zipper, pulling them down. "Now, Saint. I need you."

"Which is it?" I fist her hair and kick out of my shoes and socks. "Do you want me? Or do you need me?"

"Both. I need you *now*," she insists.

"Already soaked?" I ask, quirked an eyebrow, working my fingers between her thighs to stroke her pussy. Christ, she's more than soaked. She's fucking dripping for me. So wet and ready. So eager.

I thrust two fingers into her as I devour her mouth with mine.

She wraps her arms around me, exploring all of my back, shoulders, and chest. I groan as her nails tease my skin. She's a constant temptation and so much more. I pick her up and toss her roughly across the bed.

Leaning over her, she slides her hand into my hair, gripping as our tongues war. And my fingers slip back inside her and thrust and curl against her G-spot.

"Please. Your fingers feel so good, but you...I need all of you," she whimpers.

"Good," I growl, withdrawing my slick fingers from her channel and rubbing the juices on them all over her clit.

She wraps her legs around me. I penetrate her slowly, keeping my eyes fixed on her. Savoring how good and tight she feels and teasing her with just one inch at a time. And holding her gorgeous green gaze makes it so much more intense.

She pants and arches into me. It's like she's spelling out exactly how good I feel inside her. And the moans that tumble from her throat threaten to

push me over the edge before we can even really start.

She's so perfect for me in so many ways. I thrust my cock all the way deep into her, and she writhes under me, digging her nails into my arms to hold on while struggling to hold my gaze.

"Ready for more, baby?" I ask.

"Yes," she exhales.

I brace myself on the mattress on either side of her head, then pull almost all the way out.

Before slamming back hard into her.

I enjoy every single expression on her face and how damn beautiful she is as her black hair becomes a mess under her head. She's fucking perfect, every inch of her, every beautiful expression, the way her eyes darken as I pick up the pace and give her pussy what she really wants and really needs.

I growl against her lips and make myself hold her gaze even though I want to lick every bit of skin I can see. She claws my shoulders as I pound into her, and I memorize the wet sounds from her pussy when I thrust into her, the sound of skin on skin, and Emerald's beautiful moans. Her ecstasy is a song I want to sink into.

And when she scratches down my back, my restraint breaks.

And I fuck her the way I need.

Pounding into her hard and fast and without restraint.

Her eyes keep fluttering closed as her mouth opens wider.

And I press my forehead to hers as she comes for me.

I go faster with her legs tightening around me, her perfect thighs nearly locking me in place. I can't pull out and don't want to. Not when she feels so good, so wet, so tight, and so damn perfect.

Emerald bucks against me and screams as she comes again and gushes all over my cock.

I groan with her as I come. And as her eyes open, I kiss her savagely.

She's beautiful like this—her hair tousled, face flushed, lips parted. There's no way I could ever walk away from this.

I lean forward and kiss between her breasts, up her neck, then finally her mouth, swallowing every moan.

And pulling out, I bundle her in my arms and carry her into the shower.

After we wash, Emerald gets out and throws on her robe, and I immediately mourn the loss of her body next to mine.

"I'm surprised you even let me in," I say as I grab a towel. "And I certainly didn't expect that reception."

"Well, a girl's got needs."

"What about your boyfriend, McKinley?"

She shakes her head. "I haven't been seeing anyone while I've been here."

And I don't know why, but that statement makes me happy. Very happy. "I'm taking you back to New York, Emerald."

"No, you're not. It's safer here."

I pull my boxers on. "You're wrong about that. I've managed to find you, so it's only a matter of time before Carmine tracks you down as well."

"It's way too dangerous for the kids to be around me." She shakes her head, and I can see the pure terror in her eyes. "I can't risk anything happening to them."

"I'll protect you all. You have nothing to worry about."

She raises an eyebrow. "And how will I be any safer in New York?"

"*Because you'll be my fake fiancée.*" Suggesting that she should actually be my wife or even just my real fiancée might be rushing it a bit, so I'll settle for fake fiancée for now. Because I'm suddenly having doubts over whether I can ever give her what she truly needs. I'm ice cold, emotionless, and without a heart, and I know she deserves a hell of a lot more than that...

Her mouth drops open. "Your what?"

"He won't dare touch you if he knows you belong to me."

"Thank you for the offer, but I don't want to *belong* to you or any other man. If I wanted the protection that marriage could give me, I would have married Piero."

"He's too old for you," I say dismissively.

"*He's only forty-four,*" she snaps, clearly forgetting her previous objection to Christian that the guy must be at least eighty-five.

"Christian agrees with my plan. He's the one that's tasked me with your protection and ensuring you stay safe. So, you're going to be my fake fiancée until this shit with Carmine is over, whether you like it or not."

The look she gives me could probably kill a man.

"This is serious, Emerald."

"Oh..." She clears her throat. "Of course. How silly of me. It's so generous of you and Christian to decide what's best for me to do without

even asking me what I want. I just don't know how I'm going to ever thank the two of you."

"You got a better idea?"

"Beside pretending to be engaged?"

"Yeah, because I'm all ears."

She opens her mouth but then shuts it.

"That's what I thought."

She's still not on board with the plan, and I stare at her while I figure out a way to convince her. "Why don't we play a game of chess. If I win, you become my fiancée. If I lose, I leave you alone."

"Why would I want to agree to that?"

I cock an eyebrow at her. "Afraid of losing?"

"In your dreams, Valentino. There's no way you could beat me."

"Prove it," I clip.

She hesitates for a split second. "Okay. But don't say I didn't warn you. And if I win, I stay here."

"Deal," I nod. I knew she wouldn't be able to resist a challenge. All chess players like competition—that's the whole point of the game. Now, I just have to beat her...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

EMERALD

A minute later, I sit on the bed across from him, the chessboard a battlefield between us. The board was one of the things I packed when I ran away, and I'm looking forward to this game—and to winning.

The room is dimly lit, casting shadows that dance over the polished pieces. Saint has a stern expression as he studies the board with an intensity that feels almost palpable.

As he and I make our moves in turn, I can sense the wheels turning in his mind, each click and clack of the pieces like a countdown to an inevitable conclusion. He told me he can't play chess, so I'm surprised he knows even the basics, but I guess a lot of people do know something about the game from playing it a few times when they were a kid. He even knows a few good moves by the look of it. But despite that, he's got no chance with the advanced strategies I'm putting into play here.

My hand hovers over my knight, debating my next move. I know the importance of each decision—how every piece I move shifts the balance of power on the board.

The knight feels like a good choice, a chance to disrupt his play.

But as I glance up, his eyes meet mine, and there is a flicker of something, making me hesitate.

Finally, I make my move. The knight leaps forward, its path a daring curve around his pawns. Confidence surges within me.

He doesn't hesitate, doesn't even pause to consider. His bishop glides across the board, capturing my knight with a grace that feels almost effortless.

Frustration lodges in my throat, but I swallow it down. I can't afford to lose focus now.

My fingers tap lightly on the edge of the table as I scan the board, searching for a new plan of attack. My queen stands tall, a beacon of strength and potential. Maybe she can turn the tide.

I push her forward into the fray, but he's already a step ahead of me. His rook slides into place, cutting off her escape.

I can see it now, the trap I've walked right into.

His strategy is flawless, each move a calculated step toward victory. I realize that I've been playing into his hands all along.

The game continues, each turn a blow to my defenses. His pieces close in, and my king is forced to retreat, cornered by his relentless advance.

My mind races, searching for a way out, but the options are dwindling.

He leans back slightly, the hint of a satisfied smile playing on his lips. He's got me. And he damn well knows it.

The endgame is swift. His queen advances. I see the checkmate coming.

I try one last desperate move, but it's no use. His rook slides into place, and my king has nowhere to go.

"Checkmate," he clips.

He's beaten me.

I just stare at the board, wondering what the heck just happened.

"Well played," he says, though I can hear the smugness in his voice.

"How did you do that?" I blurt out. "You told me you can't play chess."

"No," he drawls, "I said I *didn't* play chess. And I don't. This is the first time I've played in a very long time."

My jaw drops. "You lied again..."

"No, I didn't."

"But why would you even do that?"

"To learn your favorite plays and your preferred strategies."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" I ask.

"You're on Chessgenius.com all the time, and anyone can watch you there to learn all about your game."

"You've been stalking my games?"

“Stalking is an exaggeration, so don’t flatter yourself. After all, every single game is made available for the public to watch.”

He’s been watching all my games? Learning my moves and tactics all along? “You’ve been studying my game, while I know nothing about how you like to play. That’s tantamount to...to...cheating.”

“Hardly. Anyway, it’s not my fault that you didn’t see through what I said.” His voice is beyond smug and triumphant.

I glare at him. “Being a beautiful liar isn’t something to brag about.”

He quirks an eyebrow at me. “You think I’m beautiful?”

“In your dreams, Valentino,” I bluster.

“Anyway, you’re too trusting,” he drawls.

“You’re too manipulative!”

“That’s what playing a game is all about. Manipulating your opponent so that you can win.”

“Not everything in life is about manipulation, Valentino.”

“Maybe not. But it sure makes life a hell of a lot more interesting.”

This infuriating man. I should have avoided him right from the start. Because Saint Veneti is a beautiful liar and a goddamn genius rolled into one.

I narrow my eyes at him. “*Can I punch you yet?*”

But he just chuckles in response. “We’ve got an engagement to plan first.”

My face falls. I’d forgotten all about the bet while I’d been focusing on the chess.

It’s a bitter pill to swallow, but I can’t deny the skill and strategy he’s displayed. As I gather the pieces, I replay the game in my mind, each mistake glaring and obvious in hindsight. Next time, I tell myself—next time, I’ll be ready.

The game may be over, but the battle between us has only just begun...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

S AINT

Hell, does she look good. My eyes eat her up, and my body heats. Before, my heartbeat was racing because of adrenaline. Now, it's racing for a whole different reason. Emerald's hair is piled on her head, and those green eyes that have haunted me since she first vanished without a trace narrow. "Time to take you home. Get your stuff together."

I can tell she's far from thrilled about my fake fiancée plan, but that's the least of my worries right now. I don't know what it is about her that makes me feel so out of control. She's complicated, like a game of chess. She's a play I want to conquer, a game I want to win. But she doesn't trust me after all the lies I've told. She probably doesn't even like me now that I've pulled this stunt to make her my fiancée. Turning on my heel, I stand in the doorway, arms crossed over my chest. My eyes watch as a few bodies across the parking lot enter their rooms. I take stock of everything. Keeping my surroundings in focus at all times.

I can see her looking toward the bathroom. "Don't even think about the bathroom window. You'll get yourself stuck, and we're on a timetable," I clip without turning to face her.

She huffs, and I smirk. The relief running through me right now is its own high, but it's battling with my bubbling agitation. We're not safe yet. She pulls her hair out from the bun as she tugs on some warmer clothes

clothes. Greedily, I take her in. The flare of her hips, the curves of her legs, the way her jeans cling to her thighs. I turn my face back to the hallway.

“Ready,” she says.

“Good. Let’s go.”

The car ride is tense and thick with things neither of us is going to say. Fine by me. Because it’s enough to just have her in that seat across from me. *Alive. Breathing.*

I know she’s worried about returning to New York. Terrified that it’ll put the kids in danger. But I’ll never let anything happen to her or those kids.

Inhaling sharply, my hand tightens on the steering wheel as her chocolate mint scent fills my nostrils.

I keep a close eye on her as I drive. Given any opportunity, she’s gonna take off again—and I’m fucking tired.

Tired of worrying.

Tired of not sleeping, knowing that she could be lying in a ditch.

Tired of feeling helpless and out of control...

As I drive, I tell her my plans. “We’ll stay at a hotel tonight. I have a house in Venetiville, and we can move in there tomorrow. But this evening, I’m having people work through the night to get some rooms furnished for the kids. It’s already late, and the kids will be asleep by now, so we’ll swing by and pick them up tomorrow.”

“We have to live together?” I hear the shock in her voice.

“You’re my fiancée now, and you’re moving in with me. That’s the only way I can keep you safe.”

She opens her mouth to protest but then stops herself, knowing from the hard look on my face that I’m not going to take no for an answer.

We drive in silence for a while until Emerald finally says something. “I’ve missed Milena, Giulietta, and Jaspar. *So much.* That’s the only good thing about coming back to New York—that I’ll be with them again and be able to take care of them.”

* * *

When we get to the hotel, I show her the room I booked. It’s a gorgeous suite, but there’s only one bedroom...and one bed.

“We’re having, um, separate rooms, right?” she asks.

“No. I need to keep an eye on you at night.”

Her mouth drops open, but seeing that I’m not going to change my mind, she takes her bag and heads into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

When I hear the taps turn on, I drag a hand down my face. It’ll be a miracle if she doesn’t shove me off the bed tonight as soon as I’m asleep.

Laying back, I stare at the ceiling. I hear a splash which must be her getting into the tub, and after a few minutes, the scent of bath oils drifts under the bathroom door into the bedroom.

I try to use my work emails to distract me from the thought of her soaking in the tub, all naked, wet, and slippery...

After thirty minutes, she still hasn’t reappeared, and I’m starting to wonder what she’s up to. “Emerald?” I call out.

But there’s no answer.

I get up and prowl toward the bathroom door. “Emerald? I knock on the door.

But when there’s still no response, a sense of unease prickles within me, and I fling open the door.

And I see why she didn’t answer. She’s got earbuds in and is listening to music. She’s standing in the tub, her back to me, just about to get out.

Her whole gorgeous body is on show.

She glances over her shoulder and blushes as she sees me watching. “Oh...I’ll be out in a minute.” Her back is still to me as she reaches for a towel.

And I can’t stop staring. I can see her full ass, beautiful hips, those thick thighs, and all those gorgeous curves. Every bit of her is goddamn perfect.

But that’s not what I’m staring at.

There’s something else that my gaze is glued to.

That I can’t stop staring at.

The breath sticks in my throat.

Because on her back is a mark.

A mark in the shape of a buckle.

A fucking belt buckle.

What the fuck? Anger roars to life inside me and races through my veins. “Who the hell did that to you, Emerald?”

When she realizes what I'm staring at, the flush on her cheeks deepens, and she quickly wraps the towel around herself before climbing out.

"*Emerald?*"

"It was my mom's boyfriend, Enzo. He did it the night before we moved out. He was drunk and..." She shrugs, but I can see it's very painful for her to talk about it.

I'm speechless for a few moments. *The fucking coward.* "The bastard. If he ever lays a finger on you again—"

"He won't. We moved out the next day. Honestly, if I knew he was capable of lashing out with a belt, I would have moved us in with a friend before that. My blood runs cold every time I think of what could have happened to the kids. Before I left, I told him if he ever tried something like that again, I still had a key to the apartment. And that I had a serum I'd inject him with while he slept, and it would shrivel his dick to the size of a pea."

My eyes widen into saucers. "Where the hell did you get a serum like that?"

She shrugs. "From the drugstore."

I'm silent for a few moments. "You're lying."

"No, I'm not. I really did get a serum from there."

"You did?"

"Yeah."

"Jesus," I mutter.

"Although it was actually a vitamin B12 booster shot," she adds.

I burst out laughing.

She gives a smile. "I just wish I'd thought to threaten something similar when he slapped my sister, Milena. At least I was able to keep that from happening again."

And with that, Emerald walks past me and into the bedroom. "All yours."

She moves to rifle through her bag as I stand in the doorway.

My eyes roam over every curve now on display as she bends.

Bobby Fischer, Alexander Alekhine, Anatoly Karpov, Magnus Carlsen. I chant the names of the greatest chess players in my head in an attempt to distract myself from my thoughts of Emerald.

Shaking my head, I walk over to turn on the water. And one cold shower later, I emerge to find Emerald sitting on the bed, dressed in sleep shorts

and a tee, and flipping through the channels on the TV. I'm wearing boxers and my black T-shirt is thrown over my shoulder. I don't say anything as I rub my hair with the towel, sitting down on the edge of the bed that I assume is now considered my side.

Her gaze is glued to some infomercial.

I lie back against the pillows, my arm tucked behind my head, closing my eyes to rest them. It's been a long goddamn day, and I can feel the exhaustion weighing me down, but I'll be damned if I fall asleep before her and give her the chance to skip out on me and get into more trouble.

I look over at her and see her watching me. There's a look in her eyes and a subtle hitch in her breathing.

I reach over and roll her onto her back, trapping her beneath my body. My hand roaming her exposed calves, inching higher and higher.

She's expecting me to carry on upward, but instead I haul her to her feet.

I drag her over to face the huge floor to ceiling windows which offers a beautiful view of the city around us. We're only on the seventh floor, so we can see the people below who are still out enjoying the bars and restaurants at this late hour.

She's so damn sexy. *And the last taste of her I got started an addiction that I have to chase.*

I grip her T-shirt and tug it over her head. I want her naked. *Naked and writhing for my tongue.*

"Saint, someone might see..."

"Let me take care of you, baby..." My lips chart a path over her throat.

"Saint," she whimpers as I unhook her bra and lick over her perfect tits, swirling my tongue around her hard nipples.

She moans, and I nip her with my teeth while dragging her shorts down her legs.

"Those moans are all mine, understand?" I continue licking and kissing down her belly as I kneel on the floor in front of her.

Her head falls back, and I glance up at her. Her cheeks are flushed pink, her dark hair tumbles down her back, and her green eyes are on me as she grips my shoulders.

I press a kiss to her hip, then nip her again.

She whimpers. "Saint..."

I drag her thong down, smoothing my hands over her silky-soft thighs, then up to her bare ass, digging my fingers in.

Her eyes flit briefly to the full-length window in front of her.

“If you think that I’m going to settle for tasting you off my fingers again, you’re about to find out exactly how wrong you are,” I warn.

And those gorgeous green eyes return to me as I dip my head and lick over her bare mound, pressing a lingering kiss to her slit and aching to sink my tongue into that space.

“Spread wide open for me,” I command her.

Emerald looks me in the eye and slowly obeys, parting her thighs.

I give her a lick too soft to do anything but tease her, but she’s so wet that I taste her anyway.

“Wider,” I order. “I want to worship your pussy with my tongue.”

Her legs spread more.

But it’s still not enough for me.

I grab her right leg and yank her knee over my shoulder.

“Saint!” she gasps. “I mean, I’m not used to ...”

“A man having his face in your pussy?” I ask while tracing her pussy lips with the lightest touch.

She whimpers as my fingers spread her open.

“You better get used to me being here. Because this is a view I’ll kill for.”

“Fuck, Saint...”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m going to do with my tongue, baby.”

She grips my hair as I bury my face between her legs.

She’s wet. Hot. Perfect.

“But the lights...they’re still on...” Her voice trails off as her head arches back and hips roll against me as I slip my tongue inside her as far as I can and swirl around her entrance.

I give her a long lick and meet her dazed eyes. “I don’t care who the fuck sees you in ecstasy with my head here. And once I finish with you, you won’t even have enough energy to worry about that.”

And that’s what I do as I keep eating her out. Each of her moans is a reward, just like her heel digging into my back as she claws my hair, pulling me tighter against her pussy, grinding until I graze my teeth over her clit, making her mewl with pleasure.

Emerald's going to learn that I finish what I start, and that means more than making her come just once. I'm not stopping until her legs are shaking and she can't hold herself up anymore.

Every lick drags her closer to her ecstasy, her grip in my hair tightening as I lap and suck her clit. She tastes so damn good—and even better than she did off my fingers.

Her first orgasm is faster than I expect. She cries out my name, panting. And when she begins to come down, I start feasting all over again.

I don't want to waste a drop of her pleasure. I want her wetness coating my face with every reminder I can have of her orgasms.

She tightens her hold on me and rides my tongue, panting and whimpering as she takes everything I give her.

She nearly curls over me with her second orgasm. Her legs shake, her hips grind against my mouth. I don't need to breathe, don't need to rest. I just need to be the source of every ounce of pleasure she knows.

"Saint, three is too many, I can't—" But her protests die as her moans take over.

If she's never gotten the pleasure of coming multiple times, I'm going to make it her new baseline. I'm not stopping until she can't think. She won't be able to worry about who might see us here. She won't be able to focus on anything else. She'll have me, right here, devoted to her pleasure, and that's all she needs.

Because there's one thing I know—that she deserves a hell of a lot more than she's gotten, and I'm going to be the man who gives it to her.

After another orgasm, she loses her footing, and I catch her in my arms so she's straddling me. My face is slick, but I lick her wetness from my lips as she watches me, flushed with wild eyes.

"See what good girls get when they behave?" I growl.

I set her on the floor in front of the window. And rolling on a condom, I back her up against the window and thrust my whole length into her in one swift movement, groaning out with pleasure. "Emerald..."

It takes every inch of self-restraint to stop myself from fucking her like an animal.

Hands braced on the window either side of her head, I look down at her. Watching her eyes flutter close, her luscious lips part.

She's tight, warm, perfect. *Mine*.

The rhythm I set is slow, tentative, controlled. But then she grasps my shoulders and moves against me. We groan in unison.

“I want...” Her peaked nipples scrape against my chest.

“Anything you want, baby, I’ll give it to you.” I’m going to give it all to her.

My hips snap forward, faster now. Again and again, harder and harder until her cries fill the space and mingle with the sound of our labored breathing.

My pace grows frantic, needy, desperate.

Pumping into her, the soft moans and pants of my name on her tongue drive me wild.

She’s possessing me as hard and fast as I’m possessing her. “You’re mine, baby,” I whisper against her ear as I feel how tightly she clenches around me.

She consumes me so thoroughly as my hips continue to move against hers. Until she explodes around me, her pussy clenching around me so hard. “Oh, Saint...”

“I know, baby. I got you,” I growl into her neck. The knowledge that I did this to her is nearly as intoxicating as the taste of her on my tongue.

“Saint...”

Maybe it’s the way she says my name, like some prayer on her kiss-swollen lips. Maybe it’s the way she clings and claws at me just as desperate for this as I am. Or maybe it’s just because it’s Emerald and no one has ever done to me what she has. But it pushes me over the edge.

My entire body tenses over her as absolute pleasure consumes me from the inside out. I give one more final pump into her, and I feel her tighten and shatter around me all over again, her pussy milking every last drop of cum out of me.

Panting hard, I brush the strands of hair from her forehead and temple, kissing it before I carry her to the bed. And I take her in—the soft sheen of perspiration, the flush along her neck and tits, the satisfied look in her green eyes.

That warmth inside me, that comforting sensation in my chest, soothes over my whole body. There’s no doubt in my mind now. I’m going to find a way to keep her. One way or another.

* * *

“You’ve got your brooding expression going on,” Emerald says the next morning. She’s still in her robe, and we’re sitting on the plush couches in the suite’s living room and drinking coffee.

“I’m just thinking.”

“About?”

“Everything. My mind never stops.” I scrub a hand down my face. Emerald shifts in the seat, and my eyes roam over her body, her luscious curves drawing my attention like honey to a bee.

She looks at me. “So, we just announce we’re engaged now, and then what? We just hope Carmine gets the message I’m off limits?”

“Oh, trust me, he’ll know. But from now on, you don’t go anywhere without me or my men to guard you. No one knows that this is fake except for you and me, so you need to be careful what you say in front of my men. We need word to spread fast, so we’ll have to be seen out and about. What man doesn’t want to show the world the woman he’s in love with, especially when she looks like you?”

Her cheeks heat, and she shifts a little. “Okay...”

“Okay?”

“I guess that’ll work.”

“You’ll have to give a little more conviction than that, Emerald.”

Her nose scrunches. “I’m not very good at lying. I mean, you’ve told me that yourself often enough. I’m just not sure if I can be convincing enough.”

I sigh. “You’re right. You *are* terrible at telling lies. So, let me make this easy for you by laying down some rules.” Because this plan has to work. I have to keep her safe no matter what. And I don’t know why, but I want to see her smiling that beautiful smile of hers again...

“Rules?”

“Yeah, I’ve got three rules for you. One, when we’re in public, you do as I tell you and don’t answer back with any smart comments.” She frowns at me. “Two, you act like you can’t keep your hands to yourself around me.” Her jaw drops slightly. “And three, you let anyone else touch you, I put a bullet through their fucking brain.” And she snorts. *Actually snorts*. “Look, Carmine has to think you’re important to me. This isn’t how things usually happen, so questions are going to get asked. Which means making him think we’re hopelessly in love will only work if we make it look real. The outside world and Carmine only get to see the show we put on.

Kissing, hands on the waist, fingers in the hair, arms around you type of stuff.”

“Okay, I need to make it look real,” she says slowly, although she still doesn’t look convinced by my plan.

“From now on, we’ll have to attend Imperiosi events together and go out on dates. Once we start that, Carmine will keep his distance, and I can figure out a way to take the fucker out for good. Expect to go out a lot the next couple weeks. There’s a lot of bullshit events we’ll be expected to go to. That should buy us a little time.”

Another hum leaves her, and I swallow down a curse. It’s better this way, I remind myself. All this can ever be is fake. Not because I don’t want it to be real. But because I’m not capable of it. When I originally told Christian I wanted her, I hadn’t thought it through. And when it came to telling her, I couldn’t do it, and all I could actually give her was a fake engagement to keep Carmine away from her.

I watch Emerald from the corner of my eye. And that cold dead beating thing in my chest thumps and clenches all at once. To know what she’s thinking at a time like this would be invaluable. But as good as I am at reading people, at knowing how they’ll react, Emerald is a conundrum I can’t solve. No matter how hard I try.

But if this is the closest to getting something I can’t have, then I’ll fucking take it.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

EMERALD

I can't wait to see the kids later. We're letting them go to school as normal this morning, and then we'll pick them up tonight to bring them home.

I've just finished my breakfast and am about to go and get dressed when Saint stops me. "We need word about the engagement to spread fast so that it reaches Carmine's ears as soon as possible. And you'll need to buy a ring for yourself today if this engagement's going to be at all believable," he says.

My eyes widen, and I can't speak for a few moments. "*Buy a ring for myself? You're not coming with me?*"

"I'm sure you can choose something suitable by yourself. Just take two of my men with you for security. I've let them know that you'll be going to a jewelry store later."

A surge of disbelief floods through me. "This is supposed to be one of the most memorable moments of our engagement, *and you want me to do it all alone?*"

He gives me a strange look. "Yeah." He slides his black Amex across the counter to me.

I eye it up but hesitate as I reach for it. "Um, what's the catch, Valentino?"

"What do you mean?"

“Have you registered your Amex as stolen? You know, so that as soon as I try to use it, it sets off an alert and I get arrested?”

“And why would I do that?” he says in his infuriating drawl.

“Let me see, because you like to trick me and lie sometimes?” I don’t know why, but I’m a little put out that he doesn’t want to choose the ring with me.

He gives me wounded puppy dog eyes. Fake, obviously, as I know he’s a lot tougher than that.

“And because you’re still annoyed that I ran off and you had to track me down...” Because it was pretty clear on the drive back just how annoyed he was with me.

He stares at me. “You’ll need the pin. It’s six, six, six, six.”

“Of course it is,” I mutter as a knock sounds at the suite’s doors.

Saint answers it and ushers a man inside. “Emerald, this man is from my bank. He needs your fingerprint as an added precaution for the Amex.”

My eyebrows shoot up. Wow, wealthy people really do live very differently. Although he comes across as a lowkey person, I know from Jacquetta and Nicki that he’s a billionaire—which shouldn’t be surprising given how successful and dominant the Imperiosi are in the criminal world. I place my finger on the handheld electronic device which the man holds out to me.

“Thank you, ma’am. Some transactions may require you to provide fingerprint authorization, but should you have any queries, please just call the number on the back of the credit card. It connects directly to our team which deals with our most esteemed clients, and they’ll provide you with a personal service to answer any questions or concerns you may have.”

Saint sees the man out, shows in my two bodyguards for the day, and then gathers his jacket and phone. “I’m heading out now.”

“Wait!” I blurt out as he opens the door.

He turns around slowly.

I lick my lips. “Is it limitless?”

He takes a deep inhale. “Yes. It won’t get declined when you drop 100K on a ring later. Happy?”

I nod and watch him as he walks away. I carry on sitting on the couch, glaring at the empty coffee cup in front of me. I don’t know why I’m so irked, but for some reason, I imagined that we’d go pick the ring together.

And for some reason, this fake engagement thing reminds me of how Ronnie humiliated me, making it clear to the entire world that I wasn't good enough to marry. That I'm unlovable. That I'm worthless. And although I barely know Saint, the word 'fake' keeps echoing in my mind. Because even if something were to develop between Saint and me, a man like him would never in a million years want me as a *real* fiancée, right? I shake my head. Why on earth am I even thinking about this? It's not as if there's anything but sex between us, right?

Snatching up my phone, I search the internet and scroll through a list of local jewelry stores, trying to muster some excitement. And with a sigh, I pick a store that's known for specializing in high-end engagement rings, and then I go and get dressed.

* * *

The chime of the jewelry store door trills as I step inside, the bodyguards behind me but keeping a discreet distance. The scent of polished wood and faintly fragrant perfume fills the air, mingling with the hum of conversation. Glittering showcases line the walls, each one a treasure trove of brilliance. My eyes scan the room, taking in the array of gold, silver, and platinum jewelry adorned with precious stones that shimmer under the soft lighting.

The store is already busy. I look around at the couples choosing rings together, looking lovingly into each other's eyes. And I realize I'm the only one here without my partner...without a man who loves me.

I approach the counter.

"How can I assist you today?" a woman behind the glass display case says, her voice smooth and refined.

"I'm looking for something special," I reply, glancing down at the rings nestled on plush velvet. "An engagement ring." I point to a tray. "I'd like to see those."

Her eyes light up with a professional gleam. "Of course." She reaches into the case and pulls out a tray of diamond rings, each one more stunning than the last. I look them over, feeling a small sense of excitement bubbling up inside me.

As I peruse the options, the assistant plucks one from the tray after she sees me eyeing it up. "This is a particularly elegant ring. It's a princess cut.

Very sophisticated.”

“It is gorgeous,” I say slowly.

“Here, try it on,” she encourages me.

Slipping it onto the ring finger of my left hand, I’m taken straightaway with its exquisite design and the way it catches the light. “How much does it cost?” I ask, already bracing myself for the answer.

“It’s priced at two hundred thousand dollars,” she announces. And the excitement inside me immediately deflates because he did mention something about me spending 100K, so he obviously had a budget in mind.

I look through the rest of the rings on the tray and point out another one to try on. She plucks it from its velvet cushion and hands it to me.

It’s beautiful and fits perfectly. “And the price?” I ask carefully.

“One million dollars.”

Oh gosh, this isn’t going well at all. I continue browsing the rest of the rings on the tray, but not being really drawn to any of them, I point out another tray to look at.

As soon as it’s set in front of me, one ring catches my eye. It’s a masterpiece. Three huge flawless diamonds in an intricate setting on a platinum band. The trio of diamonds catches the light in a way that creates a mesmerizing array of colors, each facet gleaming with unparalleled brilliance. “That one,” I say, pointing to it. The assistant smiles as she carefully lifts it from the tray and hands it to me. I slip it on, and it fits perfectly. I hold my hand up to the light, turning it slowly, marveling at the way it sparkles.

“This is an exquisite piece,” she remarks. “The main diamonds are superb, and the band is crafted from the finest platinum and lined with more diamonds.”

“How much?” I ask.

“Two point five million dollars,” she responds, her tone respectful and matter-of-fact. “It’s the weight of the diamonds but also their quality,” she adds almost apologetically. “Excellent cut, flawless clarity, and colorless means that these diamonds are the closest to perfection that anyone will get.”

“Two point five million dollars?” *Holy crap.* I gaze around myself, and my heart dips. Would it really have hurt Saint to come with me today instead of going to work? If he came with me, maybe I wouldn’t feel like such a loser among all these lovestruck couples surrounding me...

“Yes, two point five million,” the assistant confirms.

The number hangs in the air for a moment, almost surreal.

And my face lights up as I come up with a plan.

This ring is over ten times the price of the first ring I tried—*meaning that it’s absolutely perfect.*

“I’ll take it,” I say with relish, sliding Saint’s black Amex over to her.

Her eyes practically flash with dollar signs as she mentally calculates her commission on the piece, and she leads me to a private room to complete the transaction. I have to give that fingerprint authorization thing, and I assume it’s for high value transactions. The process is smooth and efficient, and soon, the ring is mine. “Congratulations,” she says warmly. “This is a truly remarkable piece.”

“Thank you.” And after leaving the jeweler’s, I have a little more shopping to do, and I practically skip along the sidewalk as I head to the next store on my list.

* * *

When I get back to the hotel, Saint is sitting at the small desk, tapping away at his laptop.

The two bodyguards stand back respectfully as I flash my hand in front of him. “I got my ring. Do you like it?”

His eyes widen slightly as he takes in the huge diamonds.

“It’s...nice. Er, how much did it cost exactly?”

“Two point five million,” I announce.

“*Two point five?*” he says slowly.

“Yeah.”

“*Million?*”

“Yep.”

“*Dollars?*” he adds in a hoarse voice.

“Uh-huh.”

“On a ring?”

“Well, some might call it a ring. But I think *a rock* is a more accurate description.”

“Jesus fucking Christ and all the goddamn saints!”

I arch a manicured eyebrow at him. “I’m pretty sure that’s blasphemy on multiple levels. You know, you might want to see about going to confession this Sunday.”

“Is this something to do with the fact that I sent you to get the ring by yourself?” he asks slowly.

“No,” I clip.

And as the realization sinks in of what I’ve done, his jaw drops like a rollercoaster ride suddenly dipping at high speed. “That sort of money would buy me a *goddamn mansion*.”

I wave a dismissive hand in the air. “You already have one of those, *remember?*”

A vein throbs on his forehead. “A mansion. *With a backyard the size of a freaking football field.*”

I give a nonchalant shrug. “I mean, if you’re into football...”

His eyes narrow to slits. “A mansion. With a backyard the size of a football field. *And bathrooms with swan-shaped fucking faucets that pour with pure liquid gold when you turn them on!*”

I tilt my head to one side as I gaze at him. “Now you’re just being goddamn tacky,” I drawl.

He snatches up my hand and marches me away from the bodyguards and into the bedroom. Slamming the door shut, he spins around to face me. “*What the hell were you thinking, Emerald?*”

I put my hand on my hip. “You’re the one who said that our engagement has to be *believable* and that we need word to spread *fast*. And no one would believe that I’d marry a guy who wasn’t super generous with his money—not with the way everyone likes to call me a gold digger. I thought you’d be *happy* that I thought of a way to make the ring lie more convincing.”

His jaw drops before he buries his head in his hands. “Christ, I don’t know whether to be mad at the ridiculous amount you spent...or downright impressed with your plan,” he mutters with a groan.

“Well, looking on the bright side, word should spread fast now,” I say with a grin. “I mean, your men are bound to gossip about the two-point-five-million-dollar ring and your over-the-top reaction to it because you know how everyone in the Imperiosi loves to gossip...”

* * *

I look down as I twist the ring around my finger. After leaving the jewelry store earlier, I made a stop at another store and asked the bodyguards to wait outside. That store does the best costume jewelry, and I purchased a cheap lab-created diamond ring. Then putting that on my finger, I took the original ring to another jewelry store and sold it. They actually paid me twenty grand more than I purchased it for. And I got them to make out the check to my favorite charity—one that supports single moms and their kids.

Because even though Saint can easily afford a few million bucks for a ring, something inside me makes it difficult to waste so much money on such a superficial item. I know that's rich coming from me, what with my shallow need to constantly steal beautiful dresses, but at least I know that the two point five million will be going to a deserving cause.

I would have mentioned this all to Saint when we were alone, but he was already so mad that I thought it wise not to mention anything else about the ring.

Instead, I think with satisfaction about how much the single moms' shelter is going to be able to do with my donation to them. They mentioned when I rang them earlier that they'll finally be able to purchase a much-needed additional shelter, convert it to meet their needs, and fund the operational costs for a good while. The cost of any sort of real estate in New York is astronomical, but the charity desperately needs another location in the city, and I give a sigh of contentment as I think about what good the money will achieve.

I sigh as I think how we really need this fake fiancée plan to work. Because with the danger looming from Carmine, there's absolutely no room for failure...

CHAPTER TWENTY

EMERALD

The schools are right next to each other, and when we arrive to pick them up, I can't help but grin like a maniac at the way the kids leap all over me. Even Milena gives me a tight hug. God, I've missed them so much, and I'm just so glad that they're okay.

Once we're back in his SUV, I explain to the kids that we're going to be moving in with Saint for a while.

"What about the apartment?" Jaspar asks.

"Well, you see, um, Saint and I are, er, getting married."

Milena looks surprised, but I just smile at her. Saint talked to me about this, and he said it was best that the kids believe our engagement is real so that they don't reveal the truth to anyone by mistake.

Jaspar's nose scrunches up. "You're marrying a cereal thief, Em? Jeez, where do you find these guys?"

Saint's face falls at the opinion of the six-year-old, and I fight to suppress my grin.

"I thought you had higher standards than that," Jaspar continues, oblivious to the glare Saint is giving him.

A while later, Saint pulls into the drive of a grand house in Venetiville. Looking up at the mansion, I can tell that the kids are impressed. It's even bigger and grander than Giotto's place.

We climb out of the car, and I notice the armed soldiers patrolling the grounds. The Cicconis don't live in Venetiville, and I know that Christian's banned them from the area while they have me on a hit list.

"How many people did you have to rob to get a crib like this?" Jaspar asks with a furrowed brow.

My mouth twitches, but I decide not to correct him about what Saint actually spends most of his time doing—killing. It's better at his age that he thinks the mafia are just about robbing people.

Before we picked up the kids from school, we swung by my place, and I packed up some bags and boxes of things to last us all while we have to stay here.

Saint pops the trunk and grabs a handful of bags. "You know, for not having a lot of shit, you have a lot of shit," Saint mutters as he moves past me.

"It's not that much!" I call after him. The house has a grand entrance, towered by worn stone columns. The dark oak doors are both open and lead into the large and very formal looking atrium—yeah, we have an atrium now, which Saint tells me is bigger and better than a plain foyer—with two staircases leading to a landing on the second floor. There are several doors and what looks like a sitting room with furniture covered in sheets. Milena and Giulietta stare up at the second story, mouths open.

The box in my arms vanishes, and I stop my gawking in enough time to see Saint disappearing up the stairs.

"This place is..." Milena starts, turning around.

"Big?" Giulietta finishes. "Is there a pool?"

I shrug, unsure as I walk down the marble tiles that stretch across the atrium. "Maybe?"

"Can we see our room?" Milena asks.

"Oh...uh." I'm not sure what to tell them. Saint and I only briefly discussed this move. And by briefly, I mean he told me how it was going to go down, and that was that. But it's probably a safe bet to assume there are plenty of rooms for all of us.

"Can we pick them out?" Milena asks excitedly, and I open and close my mouth trying to find the answer. This is Saint's house, not ours.

"You all have a room down the hall," Saint says from the landing above us. "I can show you."

The two girls race up the stairs, Giulietta protesting that Milena had a head start, while Jaspar follows more slowly.

“Hey! No running!” I call out, knowing that my words are going in one ear and out the other. With a shake of my head, I let my gaze move around the entire place again, taking in the light wood paneling that line the walls, and I make my way into the other rooms. Standing in a dining room, I admire the big windows, the modern looking light fixture above my head, and the polished hardwood floors. It’s modern and yet elegant and traditional. And so very Saint.

“You coming on the tour?” Through the open doorway, I can just about see Saint as he leans his forearms against the railing, looking down at me with that smirk of his.

“Uh, yeah, I guess.”

I climb the staircase slowly, still looking around myself, and when I get to the landing, Saint falls into step beside me, the warmth of his hand heating my lower back. “I figured you guys would want to be near each other. Emerald and I are on the other side. This floor is mainly bedrooms, so if you don’t want the ones I’ve picked out, you can pick out another.”

“Which is mine?” Milena asks in an eager tone.

“Yours is the last on the left, Giulietta’s is the one right before that, and Jaspar’s is the last on the right.”

They all take off toward their rooms, leaving me and Saint in the hallway.

“This is a lot,” I murmur.

“Is it? It’s just a house.” He shrugs.

“A house with how many bedrooms and bathrooms exactly?”

“Not sure. But enough that they can each have their own.”

“It’s gigantic!” Milena’s voice calls in a squeal, and I take a peek at it.

“I had them decorated and furnished for you,” Saint adds. “I didn’t have much time, but money makes things happen fast. If you want to do anything else to the rooms, just let me know, and I’ll arrange it.”

She squeals again, lifting her phone to take pictures. “You’re the best!”

“What’s this door?” Giulietta pipes up.

“That’s the bathroom,” Saint answers as we fill the doorway of Giulietta’s room.

“Look, Em!” Giulietta tugs at my hand, bringing me into the room more. “A real play table! And a tea set!”

Sure enough, there's a pink table with a lacy tablecloth, plus four matching chairs. I can't help myself from flashing a radiant smile at Saint. "That was nice of you."

"It was the least I could do for them—for all of you..."

"This is a room fit for a princess," I say, suddenly feeling a little uncomfortable at the undertone in his voice. I just don't get this man.

"Thanks for all this!" Milena trills as she joins us. Giulietta nods before rushing at us to hug Saint's leg. "Thanks Mr. Saint!"

"Just Saint, kiddo." He pats her head. "I'm glad you like it."

"You trying to get two Fiorelli girls smitten with you?" I ask in a dry tone.

"Three."

"Three?"

"Yeah, you as well." His voice brushes my ear, and I shiver.

Remember, Em, this is all just fake...

"How about you, Jaspar? Let's see your room?" I say. I push open the door and see a room which is a six-year-old kid's dream. Especially one who likes puzzles and dinosaurs as much as Jaspar does. I can tell he's still a little suspicious of Saint after the Lucky Charms incident, and he's trying not to be excited, but the way his little body is vibrating tells me that he is.

"I hope it's okay," Saint tells him. "I know you like this stuff, so I had the decorators do something special." They even got him a giant stuffed dinosaur which I know he's going to love. "Settle in, and we'll come get you in a bit."

"What? What are we doing?" I ask Saint.

He smirks, tugging me down the hall. "I want to show you where *you'll* be sleeping."

"Oh?"

Saint nods and pushes open the sleek solid wood French doors. With a swift tug, he pulls me into the room, and my mouth drops open. The same wood paneling that lined the walls downstairs is here as well, and the large windows let in all the natural light possible. A big bed sits against one wall, with two nightstands on either side.

"This is wow," I have to admit. My eyes roam around the rest of the space. There's a long dresser, a full standing mirror, and two white velvet armchairs, but it's the chessboard between those armchairs that gets my

attention. It's different from the board we normally play on. This one looks custom.

"You like it?"

"Yeah, it's great."

And the smile on his face makes my heart thunder in my chest as he closes the distance between us. I swallow around the lump in my throat.

"If you want to change anything, let me know."

"No, it's fine."

"Emerald, this is your room too."

"Oh, and here I thought I'd be sleeping alone."

"Not a chance, baby."

My back hits the wall as he walks me backward, and it's so easy to forget that he's just playing a character.

"Get unpacked, and I'm going to go see about getting dinner. The staff is pretty barebones. A maid comes in each day to deal with the cleaning and laundry, and there's a gardener, but no chef. But if you want one, let me know."

I laugh. "Oh no. I'm a big girl. I can cook our meals."

"Except tonight."

"Sure."

His lips ghost against my neck, and I forget how to speak or breathe for a second. The way he's got my body so on edge with anticipation is concerning, but with him pressed against me and that smokey spice of him filling my nose, I don't really care.

He steps back after pressing a lingering kiss against my lips. The cold eats up the heat of him, and he winks at me before leaving the room.

Once I've helped the kids unpack and put their things away, I do the same with my stuff. I have my own walk-in closet in Saint's bedroom, and I hang up my clothes, including the dresses I stole while I was away and working for Winifred. They're a tether to an old life I can't give up yet. And Saint won't need to come into my closet, so what Saint doesn't know won't hurt him, right?

Once the takeout arrives, we all go down and sit around the large kitchen island. The conversation flows as everyone eats. Milena and Giulietta discuss whose room is better and how Milena is going to make some amazing mural on the wall with spray paint. Saint just laughs it off, easily joining in with everyone.

“So, what’s your room like, Em?” Milena asks.

“Oh, um, you know, very luxurious.” I shrug, shoveling some food into my mouth to avoid talking. I don’t want to talk about the bedroom arrangement, although the kids will see it soon enough.

After dinner, we let the kids run around and explore. It’s Friday night, so I let them stay up later than normal, soaking up being with them again and catching up on all their news.

Eventually, I manage to get Jasper and Giulietta upstairs for their bath and bedtime.

Flipping off the switch to Giulietta’s room, I move out into the hall. With the exception of Milena, who’s gabbing away on her cell phone to a friend, the others are all tucked into bed and sleeping.

I walk back to his—*our*—bedroom and come to an abrupt halt and shriek. “*What’s going on?*”

Because staring back at me is not just Saint but also two other sets of piercing blue eyes.

“Meet Serial and Killer,” Saint replies in a casual tone.

I back away.

Slowly.

Never taking my eyes off any of them.

“*You never mentioned any of this.*”

Serial edges toward me. “Didn’t I?” he drawls.

Killer eyes me up like a freaking piece of meat.

“You know you didn’t...”

He shrugs. “What can I say?”

“I have three words for you, Valentino. Lying. By. Omission.”

“I got the feeling that you wouldn’t have come here if you’d known about them.”

“*You think?*” I usually love animals, and I adored the dogs at Winifred’s shop, but these dogs are something else altogether. Serial’s tongue is hanging out as he sizes me up and wonders if I’ll fit on his dinner plate. Killer looks like he’s ready to pounce in a spilt second if I make a wrong move. “You never said anything about having dogs. And especially nothing about having dogs called Serial and Killer who look like they want to *devour me whole*. And why on earth are you living with a couple of *murderers?*”

“Don’t you think you’re being a little bit *dramatic*, Emerald? It’s just their names. They won’t harm you...unless...”

“Unless, what?”

“Unless you try something stupid.”

“Stupid?”

“Like running off again.” He crosses his arms and smirks at me. “They’re my guard dogs, and they’re going to keep an eye on you while you’re here.”

I’ve never considered myself a violent person, but there’s something about Saint Veneti that has me seeing red. Because as if his crazy fake fiancée plan isn’t bad enough, now he’s also going to put his dogs on me to make sure I don’t get up to anything I shouldn’t. I mean, he’s totally a control freak, and I wonder what the heck I’ve let myself in for with this man. Okay, maybe I *am* being a little dramatic over the dogs, but the way they keep looking at me and especially those names are making me slightly freak out. “Why couldn’t you have given them normal names?”

“Those were their names when I adopted them from the shelter, and I never got around to renaming them.”

He ushers them out of the bedroom. And as soon as the door is closed on them, I flop back onto the bed and heave a sigh of relief. I wouldn’t be able to sleep a wink if they stayed in the room.

He sits on the edge of the bed looking at me. The hot path of his eyes raking over my body makes me shiver. “Care for a game of chess?”

“You want to play *now*?” I say.

“Yeah, I do. I think we’ll be playing every night from now on.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” I prop myself up on my forearms. “And why’s that?”

“If I remember correctly, playing chess gets you all hot and bothered.”

I shake my head. “No, it’s winning that does that.”

“Pretty sure the same goes for me...”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

EMERALD

The next morning, my legs stretch out behind me as I lay across the rug in Saint's spacious lounge. The board game sits between me and the kids. Jaspar's eyeing the board like he's planning a hostile takeover while Giulietta's organizing her cards in that particular way she does. Milena is draped over the couch on her phone like the typical teenager she is.

My heart clenches at seeing them all. So free. So relaxed. *Thank God that they don't realize the full extent of the danger that's lurking.*

It's just great to be spending time with them, and given it's the weekend, I've got two whole days to catch up with them all.

Serial and Killer are in the library with the door to the rest of the house closed. The French doors in there have been left open though, giving them free rein to come and go from the large backyard. The thought of them so nearby has me on edge.

The kids, however, have already seen the dogs since the top pane of the library's door is clear glass. "Em, when can we play with the puppies?" Jaspar asks for the twentieth time.

"I told you, Jaspar, they're not puppies. And they're not dogs for playing with. They're Saint's guard dogs."

* * *

In the afternoon, Saint gives me a quick call. “Look, Emerald, I’m sorry about this, but I need to go away for a few days. Work stuff. But I’ve made arrangements for the security to be doubled, and you’re absolutely safe at my mansion with my men protecting you and the kids.”

My mouth drops slightly. “What about the dogs?” I wail, not knowing what else to say—because there’s no way that I’m admitting that I might be just the slightest bit disappointed that he’s not going to be here with me.

“I’ll get one of my guys to feed them and take them for walks. They love hanging around with my men, so they won’t get lonely.”

But it’s not the dogs getting lonely that I’m worried about...

After the phone call, I sit on the couch with my arms crossed.

“Em, can we play with the puppies now?” Giulietta asks.

“Sorry, honey, like I said, they’re guard dogs.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t play with them too,” Giulietta says with a pout. “They look cute and fluffy.”

Cute and fluffy? Um, I don’t think so.

“What are their names?” Jaspar asks.

“They’re called, er...” But how do I tell the kids that the dogs are called Serial and Killer? I don’t want the names to totally freak them out in the same way that happened to me. “I’m not sure what their names are,” I say in a weak voice, crossing my fingers behind my back.

“They haven’t got names yet,” Giulietta announces. “That means we can name them ourselves!”

“Oh, I’m not sure—”

But before I can finish, Jaspar squeals in excitement and drowns my voice out. “Let’s go and look at the puppies again, and then we can decide what names will suit them!” And Jaspar starts dragging Giulietta and me by the hand to look at the dogs through the door’s glass.

Arriving outside the library, we stay in the hallway while the kids stand on tiptoes and press their little noses up against the pane of glass. I find myself standing back a little, still wary of the animals despite the physical barrier. The dogs’ bright blue eyes are intense against their black and white fur, and at a guess, I’d say they are Huskies.

“I’m having one puppy, and you can have the other one,” Jaspar tells his sister. “And I’m calling mine Pumpkin.”

“And mine’s called Poochie,” Giulietta announces, making her mind up.

“Pumpkin and Poochie,” I say weakly. But at least those names sound way less terrifying than Serial and Killer.

* * *

A few days later, Saint returns from his murdering trip or whatever it is that he had to do. Walking in, Giulietta is all smiles when she sees him. It’s time for dinner, so we all sit down around the kitchen island for the spaghetti and meatballs I made.

After dinner, Saint heads toward the library.

“Are you taking the puppies for a walk?” Jaspar asks.

Saint grins when he hears his huge guard dogs being described as puppies. “Sure am. Do you guys want to come?”

Jaspar and Giulietta nod enthusiastically and trail after him, as do I.

He walks into the library but seeing the dogs aren’t there, he knows they must already be in the backyard. He stands by the open French doors and calls out. “Serial, Killer!”

No response.

“Serial? Killer?”

Not a single woof or bark comes in response.

“Serial, Killer! Where are you?” He drags a hand through his hair. “That’s weird,” he mutters. “They’re well-trained and always come when I call them.”

Giulietta giggles. “You’re calling out wrong. That’s why they’re not coming.”

A frown creases his brow. “What do you mean?”

Giulietta and Jaspar stand next to him and call out to the dogs. “Pumpkin! Poochie! Time for snuggle wuggles!”

We hear the pounding of paws, and within seconds, they come dashing in from the backyard, their tongues lolling and blue eyes shining with excitement. Laughter bubbles out of the children as the animals nearly knock them over in their eagerness, tails wagging at a furious speed and woofing away with enthusiasm at the prospect of snuggle time.

“*Pumpkin? Poochie? Snuggle wuggles?* What the hell, Emerald?” Saint grits out.

“You’re such a *liar*, Valentino,” I say. “They aren’t guard dogs. These two are just two big furbabies, and they wouldn’t harm a fly. Isn’t that right, my fluffy boys?” I ask as I crouch down to their level and speak to them in that special cooing voice I use just for them.

Their fur is cool from the crisp air outside, and they nuzzle against me, pushing their heads into my hands. I rub behind their ears, feeling the velvety softness of their luxurious thick coats. They let out cute, happy sounds, leaning into me with their full weight as if they can’t get close enough. Pumpkin flops onto his back, paws curled, begging for belly rubs, while Poochie nuzzles my cheek with his soft snout, demanding attention of his own.

“*Furbabies? Your fluffy boys?*” Saint croaks.

I arch an eyebrow at him. “You sound jealous.”

“How the hell have you managed to charm them in just a few days?” he demands in an irritated tone.

I tilt my head to one side, and my brow puckers. “I’m a pretty likeable person in case you haven’t noticed.”

“But why do they seem to like you more now than they like me?” he wails.

“Obviously, it’s because I’m utterly awesome, and they’re amazing judges of character,” I say with a beaming smile at Saint.

“I’m a fucking hitman, Emerald. I can’t have dogs called goddamn Pumpkin and Poochie!”

A frown tugs at my brow. “Look, I couldn’t bring myself to tell the kids that they were called Serial and Killer, could I? The kids would have been utterly terrified of them. Plus, it only took a couple of days and a few treats to realize that these two are just complete softies.”

Giulietta runs up to us. “Do you like the names we gave your puppies, Mr. Saint?” Her big eyes look up at him with childish innocence.

“They’re, uh, the...best names I’ve ever heard,” he croaks.

And I can’t help throwing my arms around his neck and giving him a kiss which surprises the hell out of him. “What was that for, Emerald?”

“For being so kind to the kids,” I whisper with a grin. “I really appreciate it.”

And although he huffs, I can see he’s a little bit pleased at my words, and they’re even enough to wipe the grumpy expression off his face for

once. And I can't help but smile to myself. Because although I won't say it out loud, I'm actually really happy that he's back home with us.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

EMERALD

It's late when Milena tells me she has run out of tampons, and I check my bathroom but I'm out of them too. Saint is still out working, so I get one of his men, Dario, to drive me to the drugstore.

He pulls into the parking lot at the side of the huge store. "I'll just be a few minutes," I tell him. "No need to come in with me."

He hesitates for a moment but nods. "I'll keep watch out here. Just buzz me on my cell if you need me."

There's still the threat from Carmine, but it's lessened considerably now that I'm engaged to another Imperiosi man.

Climbing out of the black SUV, I look up at the sign overhead flickering slightly, buzzing like it's tired of staying on. I pull my coat tightly around me. The night air is sharper than I expected, biting at my cheeks. My boots click against the asphalt as I make my way toward the automatic doors.

They swoosh open, and the smell of cleaning products and artificial lemon greets me. The store is almost empty at this time of night. My footsteps echo on the tiles, each step feeling louder than it should.

I don't know why but a shiver rushes up my spine.

My eyes dart around.

I take in the scene around me.

A teenage cashier leans on the counter near the front. His eyes are glued to his phone. He doesn't even look up as I pass.

And nothing else seems out of the ordinary.

I hurry along the aisles and keep my head down.

But I'm not sure what aisle the tampons are kept.

I turn into an aisle near the center of the store and immediately feel exposed.

Rows of products line the shelves. Vitamins, cough syrups, boxes with smiling faces promising quick fixes for headaches and allergies.

I turn another corner and find the section I've come for.

But something feels off...

I hesitate for just a second before reaching out and snatching a box. I don't even look at which brand it is. My only goal is to get what I need and get back out to Dario as fast as possible.

Another strange feeling skitters over me. A prickling awareness on the back of my neck. I pause with the box in my hand. And I glance over my shoulder.

A man stands at the far end of the aisle. His head is tilted slightly as if he's reading the labels on the shelves. But he isn't reaching for anything. He's not moving. He's just...there. Watching.

Watching me.

My heart stumbles in its rhythm, and I shove the box into the pocket of my coat. I tell myself to stay calm. Is he waiting for me to move so he can grab something? Is he, like me, buying something that he wants to keep private? Am I just imagining things...?

But his eyes meet mine for a split second.

And something about the look sends a jolt of panic through me.

I spin back around, gripping the edge of the shelf as I try to calm my breathing.

Just ignore him. Get to the register, pay, and leave. Simple.

But as I step out of the aisle, I catch a glimpse of him again, trailing several paces behind me. And his movements are too deliberate to be a coincidence.

My pulse quickens.

I clutch my coat tighter. Stopping at the register, standing still while he's close, feels too risky. No! I can't do that.

I make a sharp turn into another aisle. My boots squeak against the floor.

My plan is to lose him by winding through the aisles back to the entrance.

I hurry.

But the sense of him still crawls at the back of my neck.

I throw a look over my shoulder. He's there. Just a few strides behind me.

He doesn't even pretend to browse now. His eyes lock on mine.

And the hint of a smirk curls on his lips.

Fear tightens its grip on me.

I know I can't stop now.

I don't care if I look suspicious bolting out of the store. I just need to get back to the car. I need Dario.

I pick up my pace.

My boots click faster against the floor.

The automatic doors come into view.

Almost there. Almost out.

If I can just make it...

The man's footsteps quicken behind me. I don't need to look to know he's closing the distance

I burst through the doors.

Dario's still there—*thank God, they haven't taken him out.*

Relief washes over me. But it's fleeting.

Because I still need to get to him. I break into a half-run. My breath's coming in sharp gasps.

"Dario!" I yell out.

He looks up instantly. And his expression shifts from confusion to alarm. He flings open the SUV door and steps out just as I reach him. "What's wrong?" His tone's sharp, protective.

I glance over my shoulder, but the man's stopped just outside the store. He lingers near the doors, his hands shoved in his pockets, watching me with that same unsettling smirk. He doesn't come any closer. But his presence feels like a threat all the same.

"There was a guy," I manage to get out. "He was following me inside. I don't know what he wanted, but..."

Dario doesn't need me to finish. He steps forward, positioning himself between me and the man, his broad frame shielding me.

"Stay here," he orders.

“No, Dario! Let’s just go.” My voice is a plea now. I just want to get far away from here.

Dario hesitates but nods. He ushers me into the backseat, his eyes never leaving the man by the doors. Once I’m inside, he climbs into the driver’s seat and snaps the locks into place with a loud click.

As he hits the accelerator and the SUV screeches away, I can’t help but look back. The man is still there, standing under the harsh glow of the store’s lights. He doesn’t follow, doesn’t make any move to stop us. But his smirk remains, etched into my memory like a scar.

In the safety of the moving vehicle, my breathing starts to slow, though my hands remain shaky. The box in my pocket feels heavier than it should.

“You okay back there?” Dario asks, his voice softer now.

I nod, though I’m not sure if it’s true. “Yeah. Just...let’s go home.”

He doesn’t press me further, and for that, I’m grateful. I know he’ll have to report this to Saint, but I just let my head fall back against the seat and stare out at the city lights as they blur past the window. I made it out, and that’s all that matters.

* * *

“No, we don’t need to have an engagement party, Saint.” I’m sitting at the kitchen island. “I don’t want to have to put on show in front of the whole Imperiosi because I’ll fail miserably at it. You know I’m *absolutely terrible* at lying.” Saint has upped my security detail since the drugstore incident, and the engagement party is the next step in his plan of convincing people that I mean everything to him.

“All Imperiosi men throw huge parties when they get engaged. It won’t be believable if we don’t do it.”

I shake my head, panic creeping through me. “If you make me go to a fake engagement party, I’m going to kill you.”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “Really?” he smirks.

“Yeah, really.” I nod enthusiastically. “Think guns, blood, gore, and candles and teddy bears on the sidewalk.”

His expression slides into a scowl. “They’ll be no *goddamn teddy bears* if I ever die.”

“What is it with you and teddy bears?” I mutter.

I feel him as he prowls behind me and bends his head to mine. “We need to have an engagement party. What about I give you something?” His warm breath caresses the side of my neck.

I don’t dare look around into his eyes. “Like?”

The silence beats between us. I’m holding my breath.

His tongue slides up the side of my throat. “Like I fuck you.”

I mean, who can resist an offer like that? A girl has needs after all. But I don’t want him to think I’m a pushover. “I’ll stay at the party for one hour tops.”

His lips skim the shell of my ear. “Two hours,” he growls, the rumble vibrating all the way down to my core. “And I’ll come to your closet and choose your dress. You’re not wearing any stolen shit to our engagement.”

“*Fake* engagement,” I remind him as I exhale with a soft huff.

“Deal?” His fingers are edging up under my top, stroking the underside of my breasts.

“Deal,” I say with a breathy moan. And I smile to myself—because all the dresses I’ve brought to his place are all slinky, sexy...and deliciously stolen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

S AINT

I take her upstairs, and kicking the door shut behind me, I take her in my arms and kiss her hard. Greedy and demanding. Needing her and wanting her. I trail kisses down the side of her neck, making her shudder under my touch. I drag the skirt up her gorgeous legs. And she moans into my mouth as my fingers skim the skimpy fabric covering her mound before tugging it to one side.

I plunge a finger inside her.

“Oh God,” she groans as I finger-fuck her.

I need her now. I need her more and more. She’s turned me into an addict, a slave to our shared pleasure, and I don’t want to find my sanity again.

I pull her clothes off and then her thong, my eager fingers threatening to tear the expensive fabric. She’s fully naked now, and I shove her back onto the bed. Getting rid of my own clothes, I come down on top of her, kissing her again and again as I secure her wrists to the wrought iron headboard. She looks up at her arms, and I grin. “All mine to enjoy, and all mine to please.”

Continuing my trail of kisses down her body, I lick over the inside of her thigh down to her knee, then secure both her ankles to the bedframe, her legs spread.

I line up with her entrance. “You drive a hard bargain,” I growl, plunging my dick inside her when I say hard.

She cries out in pleasure. And it’s like goddamn music to my ears.

And as I take her without restraint, she moans as I continue kissing and licking over her tits, teasing her swollen nipples with strokes and sucks that I know bring her closer to the edge without letting her get all the way there.

And as I bring her to climax, I suddenly pull out. “Not yet!” I tell her.

She cries out in an indignant tone. “But—”

“All you can do is take it,” I growl.

She tilts her head up and stabs me with her stare.

I kiss her body again and again. She tries to stretch closer to my mouth. *But I’m the one in control.* Kissing down her throat, I tongue her taut nipple.

She arches for me, testing the restraints. But she can’t go anywhere.

I grin. “Like I said, baby. All you can do is take it. Take every bit of pleasure I give you until you break for me...”

With that, I palm her breast as I bury my face between her thighs.

Eating her out is like nothing else I’ve experienced. She tastes so damn good. She’s so damn responsive.

She moans for me and pants my name. And she grinds her pussy against my mouth as I pinch her nipples.

I slow down every lick. Denying her. Relishing in the control I have over her right now.

Just when she lifts her head to beg, I up the pace of my tongue working her clit. She’s so close to coming, I can tell.

I pull away and lick up her belly.

“No! I was so close...”

“I know,” I chuckle. “But I didn’t give you permission to come, did I?”

“Oh my fucking God, Valentino!”

“You’re such a bad girl using fuck and the name of a saint in the same sentence. And bad girls get punished...”

“Fuck. You. Saint.”

“Oh, gladly, baby. Gladly.”

She glares at me as she watches me get up and go to her nightstand where I know she has a Hitachi vibrating wand. Her eyes widen as I pull it out and test it.

“I’m the one in control here, baby, so you need to beg me if you want to come,” I growl.

I press the wand to her clit and keep palming her perfect tits, my fingers moving closer and closer to her nipple as she writhes for me.

I turn up the wand to the highest setting possible.

And she lets out a desperate cry. Her hips buck against me as she pleads. “Saint!”

“Saint, what?” I ask.

She doesn’t answer, so I turn off the wand and pull it away from her. It’s already soaked, and I slowly lick her juices from it.

She stares at me, eyes dilated, face flushed as she pants.

“Let’s try again,” I suggest after a few seconds have passed.

And I keep rubbing the wand over her again and again, working it over her swollen clit and slick entrance as she moans, edging her over and over again.

The third time I do this, I consider letting her have her release as she holds her breath. I shake my head with a smirk. “Not this time.”

“Saint!” she cries when I pull the wand away. She’s so damn close. “Please, please! I’m a good girl, but I need to come. I’m so close, so wet for you!”

“I know you are... But you don’t get to come until I’m inside you and pounding your beautiful pussy with my cock. If you come before that, we’ll have to start all over again,” I threaten.

I edge her another two times, really testing her determination to obey.

She thrashes and tries to hold out until she’s nearly sobbing and really starts to beg me. “Please, Saint. Please. I want to feel you. I need you inside me. Please!”

“That’s how a good girl begs,” I praise, turning off the wand.

I thrust deep inside her. And as I pound her pussy, she lets out a sound so carnal and desperate, I feel it vibrate through my whole body.

She’s so hot, so wet, and her pussy is so fucking tight as she pulses around me.

She’s perfect. And she’s all fucking mine.

Drawing back, I slam into her again and again. “I own your pussy now. Understand?”

Every sound that leaves her throat and the way her pussy keeps tightening around my cock just makes it even harder for me to hold back.

And she's begging me to let her come and let her enjoy it, her tits bouncing as she struggles against the restraints.

"Come!" I barely get the word out before she screams and soaks me, gushing as she comes apart.

I manage a couple more thrusts before coming deep inside her. "Fuck, baby! See what you do to me?"

Her eyes hooded, she squirms against me. Goddammit, seeing her so ready to go again, so ready to please and give me whatever I want, threatens to destroy me. I untie her ankles, kiss across the red skin, then do the same to her wrists. She shudders as I kiss and lick her body. And when we're face to face, she stretches up to kiss me.

I cup the back of her head, devouring her as I grind against her. She's soaked, dripping wet, and not being inside her right now is intolerable. I groan against her lips, lick across her tongue, then flip her over.

Her arms cross in front of her as I set her on her knees. "I want to touch you, Saint," she pants as she looks over her shoulder at me.

"Oh, I know you do, baby. But you're going to be a good girl for me," I rasp in her ear as I keep grinding against her. She rubs herself on my cock which is already hard again, and I kiss her neck. "Yeah, just like that, Em. You greedy girl, you're not satisfied yet, are you?"

"No..."

"You need more?"

"Yes," she moans. "Please...please..."

I bind her wrists together and tie them to the headboard. Then I kneel behind her and tug her hips back into me. She can't move her arms at all, and she's strung so tight that I have total and complete control over her.

I thrust hard into her all in one go and let her feel what she does to me.

She squirms and grinds back against me, desperate to have me how she needs. I slam into her, making her head fall to the bed, but I grip her hair and pull her up so I can hear every moan and whimper that leaves her throat as I plunge into her again and again, making her mine in the best possible way.

"Isn't this what you wanted, baby? You wanted me to fuck you hard and fast again? Wanted me to keep going until you're so exhausted you can't even get a word out?"

"Yes...oh please..."

“Keep talking to me,” I order as I watch her ass bounce against my hips. Christ, watching her pussy lips stretch around my cock every time I disappear into her is heaven itself.

Emerald mewls. “So good. I want it. Please, Saint, don’t hold back, I want you.”

I hiss and tighten my hold in her hair. I give her every inch in hard thrusts as she pushes her hips back for me. The sound she makes is addictive. It’s so needy and feral that I chase it again and again until she can’t stay still, can’t help herself as she whines and pleads for me to let her come.

“No, baby,” I growl. “Not yet. I still want to play with your clit.” I swat her ass.

“Please! I’m so close! So close, please. Please, Saint...”

“You want to come all over my cock again?” I ask. “You want to soak me with your pussy?”

“Yes!” she sobs. “Please, I...I need to come. I need you. I need...”

My hand moves from her ass to her front, snaking down to her slick clit, massaging in tight circles that make her cry out. I wrap myself around her and kiss her jaw. “Come for me, Emerald! Now!”

Her eyes roll back as little beads of sweat appear on her hairline. And her full lips part as she comes apart, her pussy tightening like a vise around my dick.

And I don’t stop, can’t stop. Every sexy sound from her spurs me on. And I can’t slow down for even a second, not until I feel my balls tighten and my abs flex. I grit my teeth and come hard inside her, pressing my forehead between her shoulder blades, grunting and emptying myself.

Emerald shivers with every breath. I quickly untie her and roll her over, rubbing her wrists.

She gives a lazy smile as she eventually gets up to grab a drink from the bottle of water on the dresser, looking thoughtfully at me after gulping down some of it. “You know, I think I need some more of your tongue licking me.”

My dick instantly hardens again. Jesus fucking Christ, this woman is going to be the death of me.

She leans back against the dresser.

“I can’t think of anything I’d rather do,” I say, stalking over toward her.

“Good boy.”

I halt in my tracks. “I’m not a dog, Emerald. “

“You are if I say you are,” she clips. “And if you want more of my pussy, you need to crawl over to me on all fours.”

I scowl at her.

And don’t take another step forward.

But she crosses her arms over her tits and quirks an eyebrow at me. And I know she’s serious.

The ache in my cock makes me drop to my knees, and I can’t help prowling over to her like a panther. “You should know that I like being at this level, Emerald. I like my tongue on a level with your pussy...”

But as my mouth reaches forward to lick up her thigh, she pulls back.

What in hell’s name is she playing at now?

“Emerald,” I grit out.

“Valentino.”

“I need your pussy. Right now.”

“Beg.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard. You want my pussy, then beg for it.”

A growl sounds at the back of my throat. This is her getting her own back on me for all the things I’ve done. Not telling her who I was the first time we met and all the other things as well. But I’m so far gone for this woman that I’ll do whatever it takes. This woman has me in a chokehold—and I want her to squeeze her fingers all the tighter around me. “I want my mouth on your pretty little pussy, Emerald. I need to feel your thighs wrapped around my head.”

“And?”

“I need to fucking taste you on my tongue.”

“What else?”

“And I need to make you scream until you can’t come no more. Please, baby...”

And that seems to satisfy her.

Because she reaches out and pulls my head toward her.

I don’t give her a chance to change her mind—the little minx probably would just to toy with me.

And I bury my head between her thighs and eat her out like I’m a starving man, making her come once more with my tongue and then again

with my cock before carrying her back to the bed and lying down next to her.

“So good,” she murmurs.

And as I pull her onto my chest, I look down at her and think about the engagement. As loathe as I am to admit it, Emerald’s two-point-five-million-dollar ring purchase had its desired effect, and word spread like absolute wildfire about our engagement. Her completely over-the-top purchase, plus my extreme reaction to it, got the gossips’ tongues wagging no end, and I know from my sources that word reached Carmine in super-fast time. Now we just have to make sure that no one finds out that the whole arrangement is fake.

But now we’re going to face our first big test in public together, and that’s something else altogether.

And I just hope we can put on a convincing act.

Because Emerald has to stay safe from Carmine...

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

EMERALD

It's the night of the party. After we shower together, we come out into the bedroom, and Saint heads straight to my closet.

Throwing open the door, I watch as he flicks through my plethora of sparkly dresses, and I feel satisfaction swell as the realization dawns upon him that every single one of the dresses in the closet is stolen.

He spins on his heel toward me and gives a low growl in the back of his throat.

"Is there a problem, Valentino?" I ask with faked innocence.

He strides over to his closet and quickly starts to dress. "You're not getting your own way so easily," he huffs. "I'll be damned if you're attending our engagement party wearing a stolen dress. Stay here while I go out and buy you a dress."

My smirk slips off my face. "We'll be late for our own party," I huff. Because if we don't leave soon, I won't be back in time for *The Real Housewives of Sunset Beach*, and I'm dying to watch tonight's episode.

"Think of it as us making a grand, fashionably late entrance," he throws back over his shoulder as he grabs his car keys.

And I narrow my eyes at him as I flop back onto the bed, already fuming that I'm going to miss my favorite show tonight.

Saint is back an hour later.

"You took ages," I complain.

“Traffic,” he says with a languid shrug.

I’ve already done my hair and makeup, so snatching the expensive boutique bag from him, I quickly take out the dress box, flip open the lid, throw back the layers of tissue paper, and stare at the creation in front of me.

I’m lost for words.

Speechless.

“I tried to find something in a color you’d like.”

But I still can’t say anything.

Because the *thing* in front of me looks like someone’s thrown up a custard pie—or *ten*. It’s bright yellow and frilly and frothy in the worst possible way. *For God’s sake*.

But I’m not going to stand here and argue. I just want to get this party over and done with. Throwing on the outfit, I decide I’ll find a way to get back at Saint later for making me wear this stupid dress. Then I grab my purse and rush out to the car.

* * *

“We’re here,” Saint tells me.

I huff, unable to help the tiniest bit of resentment from creeping through me. I’m already feeling extremely panicky about the whole show I’m going to have to put on and the lies I’ll have to tell. *You can do this, Em*. I might be really bad at lying, but I remind myself that I ran guns, shoplifted from stores, and managed to keep a roof over my siblings’ heads—so if I focus hard enough, I’m sure I can convince everyone that this engagement is genuine.

But it’s more than that.

Much more.

Because although I’ve been trying to avoid thinking about it, the fact that he could only ever see me as his *fake* fiancée stings. Stings like antiseptic being poured onto an open wound...

I don’t know why I even feel like this. I mean, he was clear from the outset that fake was all this would ever be. Who would want to be with someone with all my issues? I can’t stop stealing, I’m responsible for bringing up three kids, and I’ve got a dangerous man after me. But is it so

wrong to wonder what if? *What if he really did want me as much as I maybe want him?*

“Okay, time to get out of the car, *babe*,” he announces as he opens the passenger door, waiting for me to get out so that he can get this stupid celebration started. There’s extra emphasis on the last word in his sentence, as if he thinks using a term of endearment is going to fool people into believing that we’re actually a loved-up couple.

I purse my lips as my gaze turns to Saint. “Don’t call me *babe*. There’s no one out here to hear you. And when there’s no one around to witness our interactions, then I’d prefer you treat this as a purely business relationship—because that’s what this arrangement clearly is.”

He shrugs with a heavy sigh. “Okay, Emerald Griselda Graziella Gloriana Maria Antonietta Fiorelli, get your ass out the car. *Is that better?*”

Shooting him a scowl on steroids, I feel the muscles in my jaw tighten.

“You know,” he continues, “with a name like that, it sounds like your mom had grand expectations of what you’d achieve in life.”

“What, you mean like something more than being a *shoplifting gold digger*?”

He says nothing, merely giving an annoying raise of his dark eyebrow.

Okay, so maybe my mom did go a *little* over the top when naming me, but every parent has ambitions for their kid, right? But how the hell does he even know all my middle names? “Let’s just get one thing straight, Valentino. I don’t like the idea of you rifling through the personal details of my life. It feels too much like a robber pawing through my panty drawer.”

“I haven’t had the pleasure of your panty drawer yet,” he responds in his infuriating drawl, “but I’ll add it onto my to do list ASAP.”

I ignore his outstretched hand as I clamber out of his black convertible, and after straightening my outfit and trying to forget that I’m dressed like a goddamn freaking banana, we walk toward the country club’s entrance side by side, Saint slowing his stride down so that I can keep up on my very high heels.

I feel his gaze run from my face, down my body, and all the way down my long legs which are on full show given the indecent length of the dress.

“You look gorgeous,” he tells me, despite the fact that I feel like a custard meringue.

And the low tone of his voice does something funny to my insides, not that I’d ever admit that to him or anyone else.

“Although maybe I shouldn’t say that,” he adds, “because as you say, this is a purely *business* relationship. I mean, I wouldn’t want you to interpret my actions as *workplace harassment* or anything like that.”

“Don’t worry. You just carry on saying whatever you like.” I flick my hair over my shoulder. “Because if I don’t like it, I’ll just throat-punch you.”

I know I shouldn’t be so snappy, but my insides are churning, and I feel like I’m going to throw up. Because I just keep getting the really bad feeling that this whole engagement party is going to be a complete disaster...

* * *

I’m standing in the Venetiville Country Club waiting for Saint to bring me another drink when Ronnie comes up to me. “Well, I didn’t ever see you getting together with Saint,” Ronnie muses after congratulating me with a warm hug.

“Yeah, I never saw it coming either,” I manage in response. “So, how are things with you?”

“Fine. Ria and me are trying for a baby. It’ll be nice to have kids, although Ria’s already complaining that I’ll need to earn more to afford the army of nannies she expects.”

I smile at him. For all his failings, I can see him being a good dad.

“I’m glad you and me can still be friends, Em,” he says in a genuine voice.

“Yeah, me too, Ronnie. Whatever happened, it was fate’s way of telling me that we weren’t meant to be. That we were always better off as just friends.” Because although he was truly the worst boyfriend in the whole freaking world, we were best friends before we dated, and it’s good to be friends with him again. He’s always got me, in the same way Jacquetta and Nicki do, and it’s not often a person finds true friendship like that. Ronnie and Ria got married almost immediately after the engagement announcement because of some business deal between their families, and then Ronnie reached out to me afterward and actually apologized. He admitted he was in the wrong and really sorry for how he treated me. I can see now that we weren’t right for each other, and although it really hurt

when it happened, his apology helped me get closure over our whole relationship.

“Yeah, friends,” he says. “We should grab a coffee sometime. I’ll call you next week?”

“That’d be nice.”

And then Ronnie gives me another quick grin before taking his leave as he sees Saint approaching.

Saint lasers a glare after Ronnie’s retreating form. “What did Ronnie want?”

“Just offering me his congratulations and saying we should grab a coffee next week.” I look around the room. “Party’s going well.”

“You think?” Saint looks surprised that I’m even interested. But given the amount of champagne I’ve already consumed, I’m feeling a little more mellow than earlier.

We start mingling and find ourselves in the middle of a large group of guests who are all eager to see my fabulous ring.

After the appropriate amount of time has been spent on oohing and ahing over my rock, Marjorie Martinelli decides to start grilling me. “So, just how *exactly* did you two end up falling for each other?” Marjorie grills me.

I open my mouth, then close it. I’m not quite sure how to answer, especially since Saint didn’t prep me for that particular question. “Saint, you tell them,” I say quickly, while knowing there’s no way he’s going to be able to spin lying about being a cop as the moment when I madly fell in love with him.

A look of slight panic flashes across Saint’s face. “No, babe, *you* tell them,” he responds when he’s unable to think up an answer. He clearly didn’t think through this fake engagement party plan very well...

My jaw drops. How the heck am I going to make this convincing? I clear my throat. “Um, okay, *fluffy bunnykins*, let me think...”

And I smile secretly at Saint’s expression when he hears me call him the pet name I’ve just made up for him.

“Sooo, it really started at that funeral. Remember, um, when Saint jumped into the pool and killed that guy?”

“Of course, we all remember,” Marjorie nods.

“Well, how could I not fall for him after watching him defend my honor in what can only be described as a *Dynasty*-style Alexis Colby versus

Krystle Carrington total bitch fight?”

Majorie’s crony, Vera Vecchiarelli, gives me a dubious look. “Really...?”

“Well, when he climbed out of the pool, he looked just like a, um, drowned bunny. And that was the moment I completely and utterly fell for him.”

“Because he looked like a drowned bunny?” Marjorie asks in a confused tone.

I nod manically. “Because he looked like a *very cute* drowned bunny.”

“I think you mean he looked like a drowned rat,” Vera interrupts.

I give her a hard look. “No,” I say slowly, “I mean he looked like a drowned bunny.” Perhaps I might have had a little too much to drink by this stage, but how else am I supposed to get through this fake party for my fake engagement?

Marjorie and Vera clearly aren’t convinced at my pathetic attempt at lying. Marjorie clears her throat. “Dear, are you sure that this engagement is rea—”

Oh God, we’re going to be found out! “Like this!” I announce, cutting off her sentence as I shove Saint so hard that he loses his balance and plunges headfirst into the pool.

There’s a huge splash as he crashes into the water.

And his spluttering and cursing are the only things I hear in the momentary silence.

Then people gasp and exclaim out aloud all around me.

And although I can practically feel Saint’s scowl slicing into me, I can’t help but smile to myself about my quick thinking.

He clambers to the side and eventually hauls himself out, his expensive suit ruined, and his hair plastered to his face.

“See?” I say with mock enthusiasm, clapping my hands together. “Isn’t he just adorable when he resembles a drowned bunny?”

Marjorie gives me an uncertain nod, while Vera gives an awkward laugh.

And deciding I need to get away from their inquisition before they figure out I’m lying, I hurry away to grab another drink.

“What the hell was that, Emerald?” Saint squelches up behind me at the bar, dripping water all over the patio stones.

I blink slowly. “I had to make it believable, and I’ve got, er, standards, so I wouldn’t just fall for a guy unless there was something super special about him.”

“I’m your *fake* fiancé,” he emphasizes.

“Um, so?”

“So, lower your goddamn standards,” he growls.

Christian approaches. “Did I hear Emerald call you fluffy bunnykins?” He laughs out loud. “Why does she call you that?”

Oh God, this thinking on your feet gig is much more difficult than I anticipated. I start to reply with another made-up story. “Oh, it’s because he likes to dress up as a fluffy bunny rabbit for me when we’re having sexy time in the bedr—”

“Excuse us,” Saint grabs my arm and hauls me away. “You’re taking this too far,” he grits out at me.

I put a hand on my hip. “Look, I’m doing my best. You know that I’m a bad liar. And my brain keeps freezing with everyone staring at me and waiting for answers.”

But he just continues to glare at me.

“It’s you who insisted on having this party in the first place, Saint,” I bluster. “I told you it was a bad idea...”

“Just cut it out from now on, Emerald,” he growls. “Because otherwise, I might just have to kill you.”

“No, you won’t, fluffy bunnykins.” I beam him a syrupy smile. “*Because then nobody will ever believe that our fake engagement is real.*”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

S AINT

Even after the pool incident, I'm still determined to convince people that our engagement is real. Because that's the only way I can keep Emerald and her siblings safe—and I'm determined not to let them down.

I shake my head. Why the hell am I even thinking about this right now? I'm supposed to be working, and being a heartless asshole serves me well in my particular line of work.

I need to focus. More money's been taken from the casino. Money's been siphoned off from the casino bank accounts and sent to offshore accounts in Switzerland, then gone by a convoluted route through Cyprus and Malta to Italy. We still don't know who the traitor is or if it's going to lead to the Feds coming down on the Imperiosi.

There's no doubt that the whole thing has a sophisticated set up, but all the leads I've followed keep coming to a fucking dead end. Several of those leads confirmed that the Italian involved with the Croatians was indeed an Imperiosi man, but that's where the trail died and stayed that way.

I've also had a guy, Dale, doing a forensic investigation on the casino's IT systems. He's been identifying vulnerabilities in the cybersecurity system and analyzing digital evidence to try and reconstruct how the money could have been taken in the first place.

It's taken him a while—it's been far from straightforward—but he's convinced some of the money is being siphoned off by a hacker called

Kevin Anderson. This Anderson guy used to work for the NSA, so he's obviously a smart guy. I just hope he's the guy I'm looking for.

I feel adrenaline surge in me at the thought of finally tracking down who's responsible for this whole shitshow. Dale gives me the location for the hacker, and as soon as I have that address, I'm over there like a shot.

The hacker lives in upstate New York. Normally, I'd stake out the place to make sure of his movements before moving in, but this whole problem and the associated dangers have been going on for far too long now, and my patience is worn thin. So, I do the next best thing to get intel on the hacker—I ask his neighbor.

After watching Kevin go out for a run, I take the elevator up to the third floor of the apartment block. I've searched who else lives on this floor, and I've selected the lady opposite him as the best option.

Knocking at her door, I wait until I hear her approaching. Moments later, I meet the stare of a woman who must be around seventy-five.

She frowns at me as the door creaks open. "Yes? Can I help you?"

"Mrs. Wilkins?"

"That's right," she clips.

"I'm looking for some information on your neighbor, Kevin Anderson."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "The man's a scumbag. He beat his kid once. DCFS were around like a shot, and the kid got taken into care. He was only nine. I just hope the poor kid's happy and safe now."

Just as I thought, the old dear knows everything that goes on with her neighbors. "Hmm, he sounds a bad sort."

"He sure is," she huffs. She peers at me from over her thick glasses with a quizzical look. "Who, again, did you say you are?"

I spy a small dog behind her and immediately know she must be an animal lover. "I'm from animal control. We had an anonymous report that Kevin might be mistreating an animal."

She runs her beady eyes over me, from head to toe, taking in my all-black outfit. If she doesn't believe the animal control line, I'll tell her it was a slip of the tongue and I'm actually an undertaker and Kevin has called me in to arrange a funeral. I just won't mention that it's his own.

"Animal control, you say?"

"Yeah."

She looks at me with narrowed eyes. *Uh oh*. I know that look. It's a look that means she's gonna be fucking trouble. I suppress my sigh. I might have

to take her out too. I was hoping to get home in time for dinner.

“You mean you’re one of those guys who takes animals to the pound when they get put down?”

“No, um, of course not.” I clear my throat. “We’re a private animal control facility,” I say as smoothly as possible. “Once we collect the, er, adorable fluffy darlings, we rehome them through our ‘Cuddle Up With A Floofball’ program—a program which I personally set up, I’ll have you know.”

Her eyes widen, and I can tell she’s impressed. Even I’m impressed at the lies I can come up with. “You say he’s mistreating an animal? I didn’t realize he had a pet, but if he’s got one, I wouldn’t put it past him to be treating it badly. What do you need to know?”

“Everything you can tell me...”

She ends up inviting me in for tea and homemade cookies, and I sit back on her sofa, listening as she tells me everything I need to know about Kevin’s movements. His daily routine, his visitors, the comings and goings of the other neighbors. And by the time I’ve polished off my third cookie, I’ve got all I need to put my plan into action.

* * *

At 11 p.m. that night, I pick the lock of Kevin’s apartment and slip inside. Mrs. Wilkins told me that she’s in bed by 8 p.m. and that Kevin’s other neighbor works nights, so I reckon this is the best time to have an uninterrupted chat with Kevin.

Walking silently into his lounge, I see him sitting at a huge desk with six screens, numerous speakers, and various other equipment and wires all over the place. He looks like a fucking man-child. He is playing some video game and eating candy while wearing his hoodie and Snoopy slippers. I mean, fucking Snoopy slippers.

I sigh. I was hoping for someone who might be more of a challenge.

“Hello, Kevin.”

He spins around in his gaming chair. And his face drops.

Within the next ten minutes, I’ve got Kevin gagged and tied to a chair, and I’ve taped a tarpaulin over the floor.

I bend down to look him in the eye. “Now, I asked you nicely what you’ve been up to and who you’ve been working for. But if you’re not going to play ball, we’ll have to try another method.” And I get to work.

I can practically feel the aggression radiating off me and can’t wait for the smell of blood to sting my nostrils.

He can’t stop his limbs from shaking or the tears leaking down his face as I regard him with a twisted smile.

I stalk toward him as he struggles against the rope binding him to the wooden chair.

“One last chance, Kevin,” I say as I yank down the gag.

“W-what are you going to d-do to m-me?” His voice quivers like a cup of Jell-O, but he still won’t answer my questions.

“You’ll see.”

“I didn’t do anything. Please believe me. I just use this stuff to play computer games and...and watch porn, I swear!”

Shaking my head, I pull the gag back up and unpack my equipment. Implements of torture.

Knives for different purposes—stabbing, carving, skinning. Pliers. A chain saw. An axe. Oh, I’m going to have some fun tonight.

I feel a bead of sweat drip down my back as the adrenaline builds, my breaths shallow.

Kevin’s eyes are wide, and he looks like he’s going to puke.

I break all his fingers on one hand in turn. Relishing the crack as each bone splinters.

“No...!” he screams in a muffled voice.

Asking him the same questions again, and getting no answer, I pick up my carving knife.

“Please!” he tries to beg through the gag.

And I stab his shoulder and twist the knife in.

That gets me a few answers from him—confirmation through his sobbing that he did hack into the casino server and siphon off the money.

When his answers dry up, it’s time to slice at his arms, leaving the length of them adorned with beautiful cuts.

He begs me to believe that he knows nothing else. But I need to know who he’s working for.

The gag back on, I hear the muffles of his tormented cries as I inflict pain upon pain on him.

And finally, by the time he's barely conscious, I finally believe that he doesn't know the identity of who he's working for. They've been smart enough to act via an anonymous channel on the dark web.

Ending Kevin's miserable life, I toss my blood-soaked knife to the ground. And hitting a number on my cell, I instruct the clean-up crew to get moving.

There is nothing more here for me. Fuck. I shake my head. I'm closer to finding the traitor, but not close enough.

And even though I got to kill someone tonight, my soul isn't in any way soothed. And instead, I find myself looking forward to going home to Emerald.

* * *

On my way home, I swing by the casino to speak to Christian about my progress with the investigation. At the end, I also update him about the Emerald situation.

Just then, one of our soldiers comes into the office and hears me mention Emerald. "Saint, you marrying Emerald Fiorelli is just a joke, right? Haha, very funny," Alberto chuckles.

"And what exactly is so funny?" I say in a low, ominous tone. "Because I'm deadly serious."

But Alberto is as thick as shit and doesn't take the hint. "Come on, Saint! You can't be serious. I bet you a hundred grand that you'll never lower your standards to actually marry someone like Emerald. Ronnie didn't want her, and well, she *is* a bit big. And everyone still calls her a whore and a gold digger, so there must be some truth behind the rumors..."

I take a stride forward, but Christian gets between me and Alberto. "Get the fuck out of here, Alberto," he growls. And once he's gone, Christian turns to me. "We need to focus on the Carmine threat. Don't waste your energy on a dumb fuck like Alberto. You can deal with him later down the line."

I take a deep breath and try to calm myself.

"But judging by that reaction from Alberto and what happened at your shitshow of an engagement party, you and Emerald have still got a hell of a

long way to go to convince people that you're really in love and that she means the world to you."

"Don't worry about that, Christian. I've got it all under control."

"She's not one of your assassination plans," he says in a careful tone. "She's a real person with real emotions."

"So?"

"So, things might not be as simple as you think."

"Look, Christian, I've got her and this situation under control. Just like I've always got everything in my life under complete fucking control."

Yeah, famous last words and all that...

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

S AINT

Emerald has to take her mom to a last-minute appointment to do with getting her into rehab, so I say I'll take Jaspar and Giulietta to their dentist appointment today—although it's the last thing I want to be doing. I don't know how to get on with kids, and it's definitely not something I'm interested in learning. I know what I'm good at—assassinations and mafia work—and I have absolutely no desire to expand my skillset to include daddy goddamn daycare. Today is an exception, that's all.

Except that I can't find Jaspar anywhere. For Christ's sake...

"Do you know where he is?" I ask Giulietta.

She shakes her head. "He's scared of the dentist."

"There's nothing to be scared of. Can you help me find him?"

"Of course I will, Mr. Saint." She smiles. Why can't her brother be as sweet as her?

I spend the next twenty minutes searching the mansion. And I finally find him in a closet in one of the guest rooms. "We've been looking everywhere for you. What are you doing in there?"

He scowls at me. "*Meditating.*"

I take a deep breath and count to ten. He still hasn't forgiven me for the Lucky Charms incident, and trying to win him over is an ongoing battle. "We need to leave. Now. Or we're going to be late and miss our appointment. And if that happens, Emerald is going to be really mad at me."

“Nuh-uh.” Jaspar swings his head from side to side.

“What about if I take you guys for donuts after?”

He narrows his beady little gaze at me. “Em wouldn’t like us doing that straight after the dentist.”

For Christ’s sake, he chooses now to care about his sugar consumption? “What about, um, if we take your crocodile with us?” I’m grasping at straws here, but Jaspar is attached to his crocodile stuffed toy almost as much as Giulietta is attached to her bear family.

The little boy scowls at me. “Why would we do that?”

“Because, er, crocodiles have to look after their teeth as well.”

And all of a sudden, Jaspar perks up with a grin. “Yeah, crocodiles have to keep their teeth nice and sharp.”

“Um, exactly,” I murmur.

“Okay!”

And with that, we’re finally on our way to the dentist. But because Jaspar is bringing his crocodile, Giulietta insists that her entire bear family has to come as well. Then there’s an argument about which stuffed toy gets to sit in the front seat next to me—as if that really matters. But Giulietta isn’t one to back down when it comes to her bears, and she’s just as protective over them as Emerald is over her siblings.

So, here I am, my car crammed with two kids and God knows how many stuffed toys, on my way to the dentist. All the fluffy bears and other animals surrounding me mean that as well as feeling like daddy daycare, I’m also starting to feel like a fucking zookeeper. *This*. This is why I don’t do fucking favors. It’s one time only, I remind myself. It’s just to help Emerald out.

I keep checking my watch. Shit, we’re going to be late. Emerald told me it took ages to get this appointment as the dentist is always really booked up, plus Jaspar has a loose filling that really needs to be looked at, so if we miss the appointment, she’s not going to be happy. Fucking Christ and all the saints, getting the kids out the house and to wherever they need to go is way harder than organizing an assassination—no amount of meticulous planning could cover every eventuality these kids have just put me through. They’re so...unpredictable. And I like everything in my life to be precise, ordered, and under control.

We’re late getting to the dentist, and I have to plead with the old bat of the receptionist for the dentist to see us. I think everything’s going to be

okay when she finally agrees to fit us in. Giulietta has her teeth checked by the dentist with no issue. But when it's Jasper's turn, he folds his arms across his chest and point-blank refuses to get in the chair.

I beckon the dentist, Dr. Richard, outside the examination room so that I can talk to him. "You've got to pretend Jasper is a crocodile and then tell him crocodiles have to keep all their teeth nice and healthy so that they can eat people up."

Dr. Richard looks at me like I've lost my mind. "I don't do stuff like that."

"Why not?" I snap.

"I'm a medical professional, *not a children's entertainer or a party clown.*"

I glare at him, lifting my jacket and showing him the weapon I'm carrying. "You'll fucking do it if you want to stay alive."

His eyes go as wide as saucers, and his face blanches. "You're not... er...allowed to bring weapons in here..."

"Do you think I fucking care? And you better make it all goddamn believable, or you'll regret the fucking day you were born, got it?"

He takes a huge gulp of air and nods frantically.

With that settled, I straighten my jacket, and we head back into the room.

"What was that about?" Jasper asks with narrowed eyes. "Were you talking about me?"

I clear my throat. "I was just telling Dr. Richard that you're a crocodile and have lots of teeth that you want to keep sharp."

Jasper grins. "Yeah, that's right! I'm a scary crocodile." And he starts making snapping motions with his hands.

The stupid dentist still isn't joining in, and I'm beginning to lose patience with the uptight jerk. I send him a scary smile and start to reach for the gun in the holster under my jacket.

Dr. Richard's eyes widen. "My, Mr. Crocodile, what a lot of, er, sharp teeth you have..." His voice comes out in a panicky squeak.

"All the better for eating up people with," Jasper says with a big giggle.

And after that, Jasper lets the dentist get to work, and I can breathe a sigh of relief.

At the end, as we walk out to my car, I high five Jasper. "That's my boy," I say, and an unusual feeling washes through me. It's like a sense of

pride over Jaspar because he overcame his fear. Giulietta is skipping along beside me, and without another word, she slips her small hand into mine.

And for some reason, something warm slides right through me and makes my ice-cold heart clench so hard...

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

EMERALD

I've gone back to doing some shifts at the casino while the kids are in school. Saint wasn't happy about this, but we came to a compromise over it, and I know that Carmine can't get to me here with the Imperiosi security crawling all over the place.

I push the loose strands of my hair back from my face as I continue to fill the cart to restock the main floor.

I hear the door swing open. "I can't believe he'd pick her..."

"Right? You'd think after Ronnie, everyone would know what type of woman she is."

I stop what I'm doing, my hand tightening around the box of cocktail stirrers. I peer through the gap in the stock shelf to the other side where two girls, Janice and Myra, have just come in and are filling their carts with chips and cigars. Either they don't know I'm here, or they just don't care.

"She'll ditch this job once she has the wedding ring on her finger," Janice says. "She's only still here as a backup in case Saint dumps her. I mean, where else will she be able to meet another rich man?"

"Have you heard what everyone's calling them? *Saint and the Slut.*" I close my eyes, wincing violently as I hear Myra's cruel words, ice crawling through my veins as humiliation washes over me. "Anyway, she's fat and ugly. Eventually he'll come to his senses." Snide giggling fills the room.

I wish I could just march up to people like this and confront them for being such mean girls, but what they're saying slices so close to the bone that my mortification freezes me to the spot.

"You're totally right," Janice replies. "And then she'll move onto the next poor rich sap when he dumps her. It's a shame Saint's wasting his time with her. I heard from Milly that he's great in bed, and I'd love a chance to find out for myself."

"You might not have long to wait. You know he doesn't do the whole *longer-term* thing," Myra adds.

Slut. Worthless. Unlovable. The words run through my head, bombarding my mind. Each a different person's voice from over the years. Again and again, those voices build to a roar until they're all I hear. Until they drown out everything else in my mind.

The box I'm holding clatters onto the cart, and I freeze as the straws spill out over its surface. *Oh God.* I wait a breath, then another.

But they carry on talking, not realizing that I'm the other person in the storeroom. "A man like Saint won't be satisfied with a worthless piece of trash like her," Janice snickers.

Abandoning my cart, I start to inch toward the door, sliding silently along, careful not to make a single sound. If I can just get out of here without them seeing me...

Then, I can just pretend like this never happened. I've heard variations of this for far too long now. From Ronnie's ma, Calcedonio, Ria, and so many others. And I want to cover my ears and block these women out. Because I just need to get away from their cruel words.

My hand touches the door.

I push it open, wincing at the piercing creak from the hinges.

And I freeze.

But they take no notice. "Maybe she's good in bed after learning some tricks from her hooker mom," Myra says. "I mean, she must be up for gang bangs and water sports and all the disgusting slutty stuff like that."

I edge open the door a little more. Just enough for me to slip through and escape...

More cackles from Janice. "Of course, she is. Apple can't fall far from the tree, right? Emerald Fiorelli is nothing but a piece of trash who belongs in the gutter."

And right at that moment, I let the door slam back shut.

Because I have to change the narrative.

I can't just let people keep on talking about me like this.

I can't let them tarnish me with what my parents have done.

And stiffening my spine, I step out from behind the shelves. "I take it you're talking about me," I snap. No way in hell am I going to pretend that I didn't just hear all that.

"Huh, what...?" Janice spins around, her jaw nearly hitting the floor when she sees me.

"Emerald, I...didn't realize you w-were in here," Myra stammers.

"Obviously," I retort before tilting my head to one side. "There's something that I'm wondering..."

"Uh, what would that be?" Janice is suddenly too high.

I laser them both with an icy glare. "Do you have to try really hard to be such a pair of mean cows, or does it just come naturally to you?" *Okay, calling them cows isn't very nice of me, but it's a heck of a lot nicer than the C-word I really want to call them.*

Neither is able to utter a single word in reply.

"Honestly, what do you get out of all this backstabbing?" I ask them. "Does it make you feel bigger? Superior? More important?"

Janice bristles. "Eavesdroppers never hear good things. You shouldn't have been creeping around and listening to us in the first place."

"Do you think that by talking about me, the gossips won't talk about you and your personal issues? Do you realize how hurtful it is when people are nice to your face, but then you find out they're saying nasty things about you behind your back? Especially when they call you words like fat and slut."

"It was just a b-bit of harmless fun," Myra stutters.

I clench and unclench my jaw. "*It's a form of bullying.* Say if you had a daughter one day, and she was going through something like this at school with people calling her mom a whore and saying she was the same as her mom, how would you feel? Would you just tell her that it's a bit of *harmless fun*? Is that something you would want your own child to go through?"

Janice flushes beetroot red.

"Just stop," I grit out. "Be better people. Stop trying to drag others down in an attempt to lift yourselves up. Do you think by joining in the gossip that others will like you more? Because let me tell you, if your so-called friends are happy to say things behind everyone else's backs, they'll

probably also be talking about you. Wouldn't you rather have real, genuine friends that you can trust and rely on?"

Myra looks like she wants the ground to swallow her whole.

"By the way, I work, so I don't need to be a gold digger. Also, I like my curves, and so does Saint—because he always tells me that my body is absolutely perfect. When you see someone going through a tough time, that person doesn't need everyone else to pile on as well. Why do women have to do this to each other? Why can't we just be kind to one another? That's all I'm asking. Be kind. You know the stuff you say about me isn't true, but you still say it and repeat it and perpetuate it. *Please just stop. Please just be kind.*"

And I can tell by their expressions that they feel ashamed of themselves now that I've called them out on their behavior and bitchiness.

I would never have had the guts to say something like this to the mean girls who used to insult me at school, and I'm proud of myself for saying something. And with that, I spin on my heel and stride back onto the casino floor.

Women like that are nothing but bullies. And as soon as they're confronted, they become spineless cowards. They'll never change.

But *I* can change.

I can start standing up for myself.

I can start taking action to make things better for myself.

And I'm really determined to do that.

* * *

When I get home later, I'm feeling good about myself after standing up to those mean girls.

Saint is working in his home office that evening, and I stop by his study to ask him something, but he's on the phone. I back away from the door, thinking I'll just ask him later.

But then I hear Christian's voice over the speaker, and what he says catches my attention. "Word is that Carmine still isn't convinced by your engagement, especially after he heard what happened at your engagement party. Do you really want to carry on with this plan, Saint?"

“Of course. It’s a sound plan, and I can still turn things around and convince people that the relationship is for real. And that will keep Emerald safe from that fucker.”

Christian exhales a heavy sigh. “Look, Saint, I hope this isn’t just you being stubborn.”

“Stubborn?”

“Yeah. You know, you wanting to prove a point. Because Alberto bet you a hundred grand that you would never lower your standards to be with someone like Emerald. You know, after he said he thought she was fat and a whore.”

My heart plummets to my stomach in a single second. And my good mood instantly deflates. Striding back toward the kitchen, I don’t listen to the rest of their conversation, fury and something else simmering inside me.

I’m never going to get away from my family’s reputation. And I don’t know what stings more—being called fat or being called a whore. Okay, so I’m not a freaking size six, but so the hell what? Why does beauty have to be judged by your goddamn dress size all the time? I’m not about to start apologizing for my figure—that’s *never* going to happen, not in a million years.

But did Saint really make such a disgusting and insulting bet over me?

And being called a whore again after what I heard Janice and Myra say about me earlier...

It’s like the word hits a raw wound inside me that never heals.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

S AINT

The computer forensic expert I've been using has come up with another lead. There's suspicious electronic traffic which could be a hacker trying to get into the casino systems again. It's coming from a location in an industrial site to the north of the city.

With Christian, Leoluca, and a group of our best soldiers, our convoy of vehicles makes our way to the location. It's dark and late, but I won't rest until we've checked this place out. Intel says it's a disused warehouse, but we have to be prepared for anything.

I'm sitting in the front of one of the black vans. The team in the back is quiet, focused, double checking their gear and testing their radios. This is the calm before the storm. With a traitor in our midst, only our most trusted men are in on this. They're not just our soldiers—they're the men I'd trust with my life.

The radio crackles. It's Christian radioing from his van. "In position. I'll give the signal when we're ready to move."

I press the button on my radio. "Copy that. Await your signal."

The van slows as it pulls into the alley near the warehouse. The building looms ahead, a decaying monument to whatever industry used to thrive here. The windows are boarded up, though a few hang loose and reveal broken panes and rusted metal.

"Showtime," Christian radios, and I give the nod to the men.

They fling open the rear double doors and leap down, their boots crunching against the gravel.

I hold up my hand and signal for everyone to get into place. The team moves like a well-oiled machine. Each man falls into place. We approach the warehouse quickly and quietly. Our eyes scan the perimeter and every shadow and crevice, looking for signs of movement. There's nothing. Not yet.

Christian's team comes in from the other direction. Leoluca's team is already working on the entrance lock. Forcing it open, the large door creaks as we push it inward, leading us into an oppressive darkness, broken only by the beams of our flashlights cutting through the icy air.

The walls of the warehouse stretch up into an abyss of black. Rows of rusted machines line the floor, some toppled over, long past being of any use, and crates are stacked haphazardly, creating a labyrinth of obstacles.

I raise my hand, signaling the team to fan out. "Team two, hold the rear and secure the perimeter," I say in a low voice into my radio.

We move with stealth. The only sounds are the faint squeak of rats and the occasional creak of the old building settling.

My flashlight sweeps across the floor. I catch a trail of footprints in the dust. My pulse quickens.

"Someone was here," I murmur, crouching to examine the prints. "Not long ago."

Christian peers over my shoulder, his flashlight joining mine. "Could be fresh. They're leading deeper in."

We follow the trail, weaving through the warehouse's maze-like interior. The smell of oil and decaying wood grows stronger, mixing with something metallic—blood, maybe?

We come to an open space near the center of the warehouse. A table sits in the middle, surrounded by chairs, some knocked over. Papers and empty coffee cups litter the surface. It's a makeshift command post, hastily abandoned.

"They knew we were coming," Leoluca says, his voice tight. He shines his light on a stack of blueprints rolled out on the table. "Look at this. They've got maps of the city. Routes marked, likely their escape plans."

I clench my jaw. They've fucking slipped through our fingers. My flashlight catches a glint of something on the table. A discarded knife, blade still smeared with dried blood.

My light catches a door at the far end of the space, slightly ajar. We stride quickly and quietly, weapons drawn. The door leads to a narrow corridor, dimly lit by a single flickering bulb, and the walls are stained with grime. At the end of the hall, another door hangs open, revealing a staircase descending into darkness. “Basement,” Christian grits out.

I nod. “Stay sharp,” I command the men behind me.

The stairs creak under our weight as we descend, the sound echoing off the concrete walls. The basement is even colder than upstairs. And the smell of damp earth fills my lungs. My flashlight illuminates a series of rooms, each one emptier than the last. Whoever was down here is long gone. But they’ve left clues behind.

Discarded woman’s clothing, a hairbrush, chains...

“Basement is empty,” I radio the others.

“They likely had trafficked women held in here,” Leoluca growls as we look around.

By the time we’re back upstairs, one of the men is sifting through the papers on the table. “Anything useful?” I ask.

“Some pointers about their operations. They obviously left in a rush.”

“Yeah. After the fucking traitor told them we were coming,” I snarl. I exhale slowly, the adrenaline draining from my body. The raid is over, and we’re left with nothing but fucking scraps. My mind races. Who tipped them off?

“We’ll get them next time,” Leoluca says in a terse tone.

I nod, but his words feel hollow, and Christian’s face is a mask of barely-restrained fury. Next time? It’s like we’re chasing shadows—shadows who are always one step ahead of us. And the longer it takes to find them, the bigger the threat of the Feds becomes. Christian’s been working his contacts, but it’s only a matter of time before the Imperiosi gets dragged further into this trafficking mess.

The ride back is silent. I keep my eyes on the road ahead, but my mind is back in that warehouse, replaying every step, every corner we checked, every clue we found. There has to be something we missed.

Later, arriving back at the mansion, the weight of the night settles around me like a heavy cloak, and I shake my head. We didn’t catch them tonight. Fine. But this isn’t over. We’ll get the fucking traitor one way or another.

* * *

It's the following evening, and I'm about to head out to the casino and stop off to tell Emerald. I hear laughter coming from nearby, and I walk into the dining room to find her sitting at the table and playing poker with two of my men, Donato and Fiorino.

Emerald sits at the head of the table, a smirk playing at the corner of her full lips as she rolls a poker chip between her fingers. The men flank her on either side, and their eyes flick to me the moment I step closer. They acknowledge me with a small nod before returning to the game.

I cross my arms. Emerald doesn't look up right away, but she knows I'm here. *She always does.*

"You're supposed to be providing security, not sitting around playing cards," I snap at the men.

"I asked them to play with me," Emerald clips in a voice tinged with challenge. "And they finished their shift, so the other two guys have taken over."

I suppress the growl in my throat. They look to be having way too much fun, and I hate the idea of any man being too close to Emerald.

She goes to grab a bottle of water from the fridge in the kitchen, and I stalk after her. "I don't like you inviting the men inside."

She sighs. "I was bored, okay? You did tell me to minimize my trips out of the mansion."

"I'm just looking out for you. Those two are awful cheats when it comes to cards." Although my men are the absolute best at their jobs, they have no qualms when it comes to how to win at poker. Maybe it's the made man in them, but following the rules of a game is not something they're known for. "I just don't want to see them getting one over on you, Emerald, that's all."

"They won't *get one over on me*, Valentino. I'm not some brainless bimbo, you know."

"I'm not saying that you are." I give a heavy sigh. "Just don't say that I didn't warn you."

But she merely rolls her eyes at me.

* * *

Later that evening, I arrive home to find Emerald curled up on the sofa, watching *The Real Housewives of Sunset Beach*. “Where are Donato and Fiorino?”

“Gone home. There are only so many times I could lose to them before I got completely bored of the game.”

I nod. “I’m glad you came to your senses. Those two would have bled you dry if you let them.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“I just mean that they’d have no mercy, no matter how much money you’d lost to them.”

“I told you, Saint, *I can look after myself.*”

“Yeah, right. How much did you lose?”

“Enough.” Her gaze shifts back to the TV screen. But there’s something in her expression which makes me know it was bad.

“How much, Emerald?”

She shrugs. “Only one hundred grand...”

“What the hell!” I bellow. “I’m gonna kill the fuckers! Whose idea was it to set the buy in so fucking high?”

“If you must know, it was my idea.”

“Have you lost your mind?” I say slowly.

“No,” she replies in an airy tone.

“Why on earth would you do that? And why did it take you so long to cut your losses and bow out of the game?”

“I wasn’t trying to *cut my losses*, Saint.”

I shake my head. “I don’t get it.” The silence beats between us as her words sink in. A red mist dances before my eyes. “How exactly did you pay them?”

“The black Amex of course,” she trills. “The bank let me use it to pay them. I called the number on the back of the card, and they immediately sent a man over. And as soon as I provided the fingerprint authorization, he produced a cashier’s check for me to give to the guys. It’s amazing the service you get from the bank when your fiancé is stinking rich and such a highly valued customer.”

I’m going to fucking kill Donato and Fiorino. But I might just have to kill Emerald first of all. “But why would you do that, Emerald?”

She shrugs. “I don’t get your problem. I thought you liked gambling and *betting.*”

And there's something off in her tone. "What do you mean?"

"Like when you accepted that one-hundred-grand bet from Alberto. You know, when he bet you that you wouldn't lower your standards to be with someone as big or as slutty as me. *I heard you and Christian talking on the phone.*"

I briefly close my eyes. "You weren't supposed to hear that."

"Obviously," she snaps, but I can hear the pain in her voice as well. "Was this engagement ever about protecting me and my family? Or was it all about winning some bet?"

It actually pains me that she had to hear any of that in the first place—and that she was hurt by it. "Look, I never even accepted that bet. It was just some dumb shit that came out of Alberto's mouth. And if you must know, I wanted to kill him there and then for daring to insult you. And I *will* kill him when the time's right, I promise you that. No one insults my girl like that."

Emerald mulls over my explanation. "And you're telling me the truth?"

"Yes. I swear it. And for the record, I don't agree with a word he said. Your body is utter fucking perfection."

She thinks over my words before answering. "Okay, I believe you, Saint. And I'll cancel my dark web order for the cock-shrinking serum."

My eyes nearly pop out of my sockets. "Christ, Emerald, you didn't really buy that, did you?"

"Of course, I did. It's amazing the shit you can find on the dark web."

And despite myself, I find myself laughing out loud at this woman and the ways she continually manages to amaze me.

Although deep down inside, I find myself wondering if things can ever work between the two of us.

I think maybe we're too different.

But are we really so dissimilar...?

Because sometimes, I get the feeling that we're just two lost souls both searching for exactly the same thing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

EMERALD

Milena is late home despite promising me she'd be home by dinner. Even worse, she gave the soldier guarding her the slip. I know teenagers act up, but I can't help worrying about her.

My mind wanders back to yesterday and the poker thing. Saint still hasn't found out where the one hundred grand of his money *really* went...

He was super mad over the money, just like I wanted him to be because I thought he'd made a bet with Alberto. I mean, I did resolve earlier that day to start standing up for myself.

But when I found out the bet thing was a mistake, I didn't want to upset or annoy him any further, so I didn't tell him what actually happened to his money.

If he finds out the truth, I'll come clean. But until then, I'll keep quiet about it.

And as if I'd really waste a hundred grand to prove a point. I only actually lost fifty dollars to Saint's men, and I'd paid them with cash I had in my purse. Instead, I had the cashier's check for one hundred grand made out to the single moms' shelter. They were over the moon when I had it delivered to them, and at least I know that the money went to a deserving cause...

* * *

After dinner, Saint gets out his chess board.

“Can I play?” Jasper asks hopefully as he drinks from his glass.

“You can play with me,” Saint says before I can respond.

Jasper squeals with excitement and settles on the floor next to Saint before looking at the board eagerly.

“When you lose, don’t try to blame my brother for it,” I say dryly.

“We’re not gonna lose,” Jasper pouts.

“Exactly. We’re a winning team, aren’t we, kiddo?” Saint quips.

“Yup!”

I giggle, unable to get over how adorable the two of them are when they actually manage to agree on something. “I guess we’ll see how the game goes.”

“Can I play as well?” Giulietta pipes up.

“Sure, sweetie,” I answer. “You can be on my side. It’ll be girls against boys.”

We spend the next couple of hours playing, and the score ends with us being tied—Saint and Jasper winning two games while Giulietta and I also win two.

Milena comes in toward the end of the last game, and I decide to leave talking to her until the morning. I need her to understand that she has to be more careful while Carmine is still a threat to us, and she needs to at least let me know where she’s going and when she’ll be back.

The kids all head upstairs for bed, and I tell them I’ll be up soon to tuck them in.

“He’s a cute kid when he’s not being snarky and thumbing his nose at me,” Saint comments from where he’s sitting on the couch.

I can’t help but chuckle. “He’s a good kid.” I put my hands in the back pockets of my denim shorts. “Thanks for letting the kids hang out with us tonight.” I totally get that it’s not what most guys his age want to be doing—babysitting two small kids.

“No problem.”

A little part of my heart swells because of the effort he’s making with the kids. I know I come with a lot of what some people might see as baggage—all my issues, plus responsibility for three younger siblings—but that Saint wants to help me means something, even if I don’t quite agree with all his methods and his fake fiancée idea. I even start wondering if he could be the father figure that Jasper so desperately needs in his life. I try to

do everything I can for the kids, but I'm always worrying that it's not enough.

I take a seat on the couch and close my eyes for a moment. "I'm exhausted. I didn't realize how late it is."

"It's nice being around Jaspar and your other siblings," Saint admits, surprising me. "It reminds me that innocence still exists in the world."

"Yeah. Sometimes, I'm jealous of his and Giulietta's innocence and naivety." I remain quiet for a few moments. "It's a shame that the mafia life forces us to grow up too quickly," I murmur softly.

"Did your mom have difficulty finding work after your dad died?" he asks quietly.

"Yeah. When you're the wife of a traitor and thief, there aren't many options left open for you when majority of the city is run by the mafia your husband tried to cheat. It's like my family and I are still paying for his mistakes."

"I'm sorry," he says softly.

I release a cleansing breath. "It's okay. All of this stuff is temporary. Once this threat with the Carmine is dealt with, we'll be able to start over new."

He's quiet for a while. "My parents were killed in a drive-by shooting." His voice is low and deep.

My eyes widen at his admission. "Jesus. I'm so sorry," I whisper.

He shrugs. "It happened when I was young. I think that's one reason why it's refreshing to see your brother. My innocence died along with my parents when I was five. Ever since then, I've known that the mafia is a cruel place."

"I can definitely agree with that. All we can do is play the cards we're dealt."

"Yeah." He looks over at me. "For what it's worth, I think you're doing a great job."

I blink. "What?"

"Despite the shitty hand you've been dealt, you're not using those cards as a reason to have a messed-up life. You're looking after your family, and you're trying your best despite the odds stacked against you. It might not feel like it now, but you're doing well."

I can only stare at him. An unfamiliar feeling courses through me. I can't remember the last time I heard anyone say anything like that to me,

not even my mom or siblings. I know they appreciate my efforts, but I didn't realize how much I actually needed that kind of affirmation. "Thank you," I finally say. "That really means a lot."

He smiles at me. "You're welcome."

We continue staring at each other, and it's as if Saint starts to look different in my mind. He's no longer the guy who's pretending to be my fake fiancé to keep me safe. Right now, he's caring, sweet, and compassionate. He cares when he doesn't have to.

I don't realize that I'm leaning over until my lips press against his. He freezes, and I quickly jerk back and touch my lips.

"Are you trying to sexually harass me?" he jokes.

My cheeks grow hot as I blush. "Sorry," I splutter. "I don't know what—"

But he cuts my sentence off by pressing his lips against mine once more, his warm hand cupping my cheek.

And against my better judgment, I sink into his kiss and allow my troubles and worries to fall away.

CHAPTER THIRTY

S AINT

Sitting on the bed, I'm waiting for Emerald to brush her hair before going down to breakfast. I could go down without her, but some part of me likes doing these small things together.

I watch her as she gets ready. She thinks that I don't know what she's been up to with my money. But each evening, I get a full report from the bodyguards about her day. This is so that I can check for anything suspicious that might be some sort of threat from Carmine. But I've been finding out some very interesting things about Ms. Emerald Fiorelli. Such as what happened to the money she claims to have spent on the engagement ring and lost to my men in poker. Because that money has ended up in the pockets of a charity.

I can easily afford the money, and the charity in question is a very deserving cause, so I'm not worried about that in the slightest. But what is so interesting is that despite her reputation as a gold digger, whenever she has the opportunity to buy something expensive for herself or keep a large sum of my money, she instead donates it to charity. And her actions show that she's as far from being a gold digger as a woman could be.

But honestly, that realization doesn't really surprise me...

I'm flicking through my phone as she walks into the closet to grab a sweater. And I remember the screenshot I took a while ago and have been meaning to ask her about. I bring up the photo I have of Emerald's closet in

her old place. “You literally stole all of these?” I ask her as she walks back out, nodding down at the photo on my phone.

She looks over at the screen, her eyes widening. “How did you get a picture of my closet? Are you a stalker or something?”

I shrug. “No, but I wouldn’t mind being a stalker. I reckon it could be quite fun.”

Her green eyes glitter at me in a glare.

“Look, I haven’t snooped through your things—yet.”

“So, how did you get that photo?”

“It was in the background check file the Imperiosi put together on you when you first started dating Ronnie.”

“*The background check file?* That sounds like spying. And that’s totally messed up.” She crosses her arms. “Why are you rifling through my life in the first place?”

“Answer the question, Emerald,” I say, tapping my finger on the screen.

Her lips remain resolutely shut as I get up and step toward the closet. She slams the door shut before I reach it and leans against it as if to further drive the point home that she doesn’t want me in it. “I didn’t give you permission to go in there.”

“You got to stop with the stealing. I’m being serious. And I’m just trying to understand you. Can’t you do something else if you really need the money?”

She flicks her hair over her shoulder. “This is better. *It’s tax free.*”

“Stop being so flippant, Emerald.”

“So what if I stole them? Anyway, it distinctly feels like you’re judging me, and I already have enough people doing that.”

“I promise I’m not judging you. I’m just asking the question because I want to understand you better.” I can’t help myself as I reach out and stroke her cheek with my thumb. “Why do you do it?”

She stares at me for a long moment before her shoulders drop a little. She pulls away from my grasp, taking a few steps over to the bed and sitting down. I follow and sit next to her, waiting for her to speak.

“There’s lots of reasons. The easy reason is that if I wear nice clothes, then on the outside, I might look like I fit in.”

“You fit in anyway,” I counter with a frown. “Plenty of people like you—Christian, Jacquetta, and lots of others.”

“And then...there’s the idea that the dresses give me a nest egg.”

“Nest egg?”

“If things go wrong, I can sell a few of them to raise cash. I’ve done it before—when we haven’t had enough money to make rent and stuff.”

I’m quiet while I think about all this. “I noticed some different dresses in the closet yesterday—new dresses that still have the tags on. You’re still stealing, right?”

She doesn’t answer me, but I already know the answer.

“You won’t ever be poor. You’ve got lots of skills, and you even know how to hustle people with a game of chess.”

“But it’s like my mom being a hooker,” she wails. “Just like looks fade, chess skills fade.”

“*Skills* are different. You just need to practice them. You’re a smart girl, Em. One of the smartest I’ve ever met. You don’t need to keep stealing.”

“It’s not like I haven’t tried to stop. I’ve become so used to it and the high it gives that it’s become a habit. I guess the thieving apple doesn’t fall far from my father’s tree.” Her tone is light as she grins, but I can tell that it all affects her on a deeper level. She uses these comments and her smile as a defense mechanism, to try and stop people seeing the real woman...the vulnerable woman. She wants to protect herself against the world, against all the accusations that have been thrown at her—whore, thief, gold digger—and this is the only way she knows how to.

Neither of us says anything for a few moments. “Why not try going to a Shoplifters Anonymous meeting or something?” I suggest.

“How will a meeting help me? I’m too far gone...”

“For starters, it’ll show you that you’re not alone. But it’s more than that. It’s a recovery program. I think it could help.”

“I don’t think anything can help me,” she murmurs.

“I’ll even go with you if that’ll help,” I offer. Sitting in a meeting with other kleptomaniacs isn’t exactly my idea of *fun*, but something inside me makes me want to help her. “We can go as soon as I find a local meeting. Just give it a try. If you don’t like it after the first meeting, we don’t have to go again. Deal?”

She stares at me for a long moment, so long that I think she won’t actually answer me. But then she releases a soft sigh before she slowly nods.

Going downstairs, Em heads to the laundry room to get something for Giulietta, while I go to the kitchen to get the coffee started.

Jaspar's already there, eyeing up my box of Lucky Charms. "I love Lucky Charms," he tells me.

I nod. "Me too."

"We didn't always have the money to afford them. Em said we had to prioritize our spending. It really sucked. When I'm older, I'm gonna be a made man." He grabs a bowl and spoon as I put the box of cereal down next to him. "And then I'll be rich enough to buy Lucky Charms whenever I want them."

Fuck. That makes me feel even worse about the first time we'd met when I snatched back the cereal he'd stolen from right under my nose. It's been damn tough for her, being only eighteen and financially responsible for her three siblings and trying to be a mom to them.

And I decide that from this moment on, whenever I go grocery shopping, I'll let Jaspar come with me. And I'll always let him buy the biggest box of Lucky Charms the store has.

* * *

I'm waiting to drive Emerald to the meeting, but she insisted that she go upstairs and change her clothes. It hardly matters what she wears to the goddamn meeting, and I know it's just a delaying tactic on her part. I wait for her in the living room, pacing the floor as I observe the few family photos she's put up over the fireplace.

I've always thought how photos can tell so many stories about people. Emerald's family appeared happy once upon a time. The kids were all smiling, Emerald's mom looked happy, and their dad looked just like all other mafia fathers. It kind of reminds me of how my parents look in the very few photos we had together before they were taken from me so abruptly.

And it only proves how photos can be both a beautiful memory and a painful reminder at the same time...

"Okay, I'm ready," Emerald says as she suddenly appears in the living room. Her eyes trace over my face as she frowns slightly. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, why?" I clip.

“You just had this strange look on your face. I thought something was wrong.”

I shake my head and move toward the door. Now isn't the time to dive into my past. The kids are at Jacquetta's place for the next couple of hours, so I lock up behind us. Even with my men keeping watch over my mansion, my head swivels in all directions as soon as we step out, my senses immediately jumping into high alert. My gaze zeroes in on everything. The windows of the surrounding houses, the faces of anyone driving by, and even the couple of children running up and down the opposite front yard.

She moves past me and heads for the car. “Are you coming or are you going to keep stalking our neighbors?”

I'm glad that she feels safe here, but I'm still not lowering my guard. I stride forward. “Still sticking with the stalker trope, huh?”

She flicks her hair over her shoulder and flashes me a grin. “You make it too easy, Valentino.”

I try to loosen the tension in my shoulders. A tension that's been there constantly since I found out Carmine put a hit out on Emerald. As long as she's living with me and I can keep tabs on her, I tell myself that she'll be fine until we can get this situation under control.

Traffic is unusually light as we make our way across town. Emerald is being a lot more quiet than usual. I can only imagine what's going through her mind as we get closer to our destination. Her hands are tight in her lap as she wordlessly watches the passing streets through the window. Worry rolls off her in waves, so much so that it almost makes the air inside the car feel suffocating.

“You okay?” I ask, glancing over at her.

“It's just that I don't want to feel judged,” she admits after a few moments.

“Everyone there is either the same as you or they've been in your shoes. You'll be fine,” I tell her. “Plus, I'll be there with you.”

By the time we get there, I've noticed that Emerald's been getting more and more nervous. Her leg has bounced the entire drive to this meeting. It's driving me crazy, but I keep my mouth shut, knowing this isn't really high on the list of essential topics right now. Because the most essential thing is actually getting her here and getting her to take this first step.

I don't know why, but the fact that she's nervous or anxious at all makes my chest constrict uncomfortably. I rub at it, trying to displace the feeling.

Pulling up, the building is not instilling any confidence in me, but it's the only group I could find nearby. Two others I tried told me that they had to close down due to their funding being cut. I peer at it from my windshield. The youth center sits in some big square building that's covered in graffiti on one side and has two broken windows boarded up.

A rough, unamused laugh huffs from her. "This is it?"

"Yep."

"There's not much hope for the meeting with a building like this..."

I look over at her.

"Oh, come on, Valentino! Tell me I'm wrong. Look at the place. The sign is falling off, the windows are boarded up, the plaster is literally crumbling on the side. What else am I supposed to think?"

"Don't judge the group by its building? Could be nice inside."

"Right, because they have the money to waste on some plush beanbags and tasty cupcakes instead of essential building maintenance?"

"Emerald."

"Valentino."

The way she mimics me like this makes my body tense and tighten. I shouldn't react the way I do, but she never fails to affect me. I turn to her. "You're going inside." I know she's just grasping at these excuses as an avoidance tactic.

"Fine. But I'm not expecting much."

"As long as you go."

She keeps snapping the clasp of her purse open and shut. I've noticed she does that a lot, especially when she's stressed, just like she keeps fiddling with her bracelet clasp and washing her hands over and over again. But I don't comment or judge because I get they are a part of her coping mechanisms.

She doesn't move from her seat. There's still a good five minutes before it starts, but she hasn't even unbuckled her seatbelt. Her lip is caught between her teeth, and I fight the urge to caress it with my thumb. My hand curls into a fist as I shake those thoughts away. We're in a fake relationship. And that means I shouldn't be thinking about her goddamn plush lips.

"This was the only option, Saint?"

Her question brings me back to the car and the way her scent of chocolate mints fills my nostrils. Her assault on my senses does nothing to stop the image of her lips parted, glistening from where she's licked them,

taking place at the forefront of my mind. That particular image has haunted me far more than I'd care to admit.

"Saint?"

I blink, shaking my thoughts away. "It's the only option. Unless you want to carry on in the same merry way and get caught and charged, yeah."

She nods, her eyes glued to the building. She puts up a good front—just like she does with everything in her life. She's always smiling, but it's her way of having her guard up. She struggles to let people in to help her, like accepting help is admitting that she's weak. But I know her better. It's the way those green eyes dart around the place and the bounce of her damn luscious leg. She's really anxious.

"I can go in with you."

Her nose wrinkles as she turns toward me. "What? God, no. I'm not a child. I can go into a meeting by myself just fine."

I arch a brow. "Can you? You haven't even unbuckled."

"Obviously, I can," she says, unclicking the seatbelt.

My mouth twitches. "Good. Now, get out of the car."

Her lips flatten at me, but she opens the car door. Then she hesitates and closes the door again.

"Emerald?"

She looks at the building, then at me. That damn lip is caught back between her teeth. "Will you come in with me, Saint?" she says quietly.

It takes every ounce of control I have not to smile because she's actually asking for my help. Instead, I give her a simple nod, keeping my face a blank slate despite the feeling that zips through my body. Because I like that she's asking me for something. And I like that I can be the one to help her.

Unbuckling myself, I step from the driver's seat to round the car and stand beside her. "When you're ready." I let the words hang between us, ensuring she realizes she's the one in control. "One meeting, and if it doesn't help, we move on and try something else."

A loud exhale leaves her, and she takes a step toward the building. And silently, I follow.

She looks up at the worn sign. I come to a stop next to her. She stares at the sign before slowly shaking her head. "I don't think I can do this."

I wonder if I'm ever going to get her inside, but I give her hand a reassuring squeeze. "Remember, I'll be right there with you," I remind her.

She looks up at me, worry and anxiety swimming in her gaze. I give her a small nod, making sure she understands that she'll be fine.

She stares at me. "You'll have to confess to stealing too."

"Wait!" My eyes widen. "What? Me?"

"Yeah," she smirks. "You have to be a thief to attend these things. But that's easy enough—you can just say you steal people's money. Because that is kind of true, what with the way the Imperiosi make their money through illegal exploits. Anyway, it doesn't matter if you're not *entirely truthful*—I already know that you're a beautiful liar, so you don't have to worry about me thinking any less of you." She grins widely at me, but I can only manage a low growl in response.

Her hand pauses on the handle of the door as she looks at me again, and her lips purse before she pulls it open.

I follow closely behind, glancing around us to make sure nothing is out of the ordinary before stepping inside the building.

We make our way down a dimly lit hallway until it opens up to what looks like a community center room. It's not exactly what I expected, but it's clean enough. A colorful mural decorates the back wall, and there's some various-sized tables scattered throughout. In the center, a circle of chairs is arranged around a rug, most of them already occupied with silent bodies. Emerald hesitates a bit, until a woman with a clipboard stands as she waves us over. "Welcome! Please, come join us," she says, gesturing to two empty seats.

Together, we move toward them, and I cast a glance at the other people already sitting there. A boy in a hood, slouched deep into the foldable chair, a girl with colorful streaks of blue in her otherwise blond hair, an older woman who looks like she's come here straight from work, and various other people. There's around twenty people in total. *Who knew that so many people could have this sort of problem?* None of them seem particularly thrilled to be here. At least Emerald is in good company.

"I'm not dressed right for this," she blurts out as she spins on her heel.

I block her way. "No shit. Couldn't you have worn something a little less conspicuous?" She's in yet another one of her sparkly gold dresses, advertising to the world exactly what it is that she steals.

She glowers at me, but slowly, she turns back around.

I wait until she sits, and then I take my seat as well. The woman with the clipboard in her lap looks again at Emerald and me. "You must be

Emerald?”

Emerald gives the tiniest nod.

“We’re glad to have you. I’ll be leading the session today. We’re just waiting for one more person. Can I get you anything? Water? A snack?” The woman looks tired, but her welcome doesn’t seem disingenuous. I shake my head at the same time Emerald does.

My eyes flick to the clock on the wall before settling back on Emerald. Her body is stiff even as she relaxes into the chair.

When the last person rushes in right on time, we finally make a start. “I’d like to welcome everyone to today’s meeting. I’m Amanda,” she says, putting a hand on her chest. “Let’s start with going around the circle and introducing ourselves and telling us a little about you. I’ll go first.” She puts her clipboard on the chair behind her and stands. “As I said, I’m Amanda. I’ve been, I guess you can say, ‘clean’ from shoplifting for seven years now, and it’s all thanks to these meetings and therapy.” She passes a look over the group. “I know a lot of you here may wonder how a group can help you, and you may be a bit skeptical about all of this. I was in your shoes once upon a time, and I’m here to tell you it’s possible to free yourself from your compulsion if you’re willing to do the work. Being here is the first step.”

I glance over at Emerald just in time to see a flicker of relief on her face. With a life as destructive as mine tends to be, it’s nice to actually help someone for once. Doing this for Emerald almost feels as if it counters just a little of the bad I’ve done. I know it’ll take a lot more than accompanying her to these meetings to undo all the lies I’ve told her since meeting her—yeah, because I’m starting to realize that maybe I could have been a *tiny* bit more truthful about certain things—but it’s something.

The guy sitting next to Amanda stands and lifts his hand in a small wave. “I’m Reuben,” he starts. “I, uh, I’ve had a problem with stealing since I was a teenager. It’s to the point that it’s taking over my whole life.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I can’t keep a job, my wife is divorcing me, and my kids won’t talk to me while I’m like this. So, this is me taking steps in getting help. That’s why I’m here.”

Low applause fills the space as he sits, and Amanda smiles at him. “We’re glad you’re here, Reuben. You should be proud of yourself for making the effort to come today.”

Next is blue streaks Katarina, followed by Trudie, and then Julian. Each of them with their own reasons for shoplifting. Some because it’s fun and

some because it's the easiest way to get what they need. Through each story, I watch her. How she reacts with her expressions.

Each person takes turns to introduce themselves, and I notice Emerald shifting and twitching as the circle works its way closer to her. Because of where I'm sitting, I'll have to speak before Emerald.

I can feel her eyes on me when it's my turn to stand. I clasp my hands together in front of me as I clear my voice. "I'm Saint," I start. "And I think I may have come to the wrong meeting. I thought this was for sex addicts."

Amanda blinks at me with wide eyes. "Oh my," she says with a hand on her chest. "I'm sorry, but—"

"Oh my God," Emerald hisses, grabbing my hand and pulling me down before she stands to her feet. "There's nothing wrong with him other than being a jackass. He's with me." She runs a slightly shaking hand through her shiny locks. "I'm Emerald. My stealing habit started after my dad died a few years ago. I don't want to ruin whatever future I could have, so...I'm here to hopefully work on learning how to stop." Her voice is soft, unsure, but she talks about why she does it. About the high and sense of control that it makes her feel in her chaotic life. About how the thought of stopping scares her. About how the prospect of not being able to afford a home for the kids terrifies her. They're admissions that nearly knock me from my chair because of the very fact that she's opening up. But I remain a sturdy pillar for her to lean against if need be, my hand squeezing hers gently.

As she talks, Amanda's eyes briefly flick to where Emerald keeps clicking the clasp of her purse open and shut.

When she's finished, she finally gives a small smile. The others match her smile, and for the first time since we entered the building, that guard she's had up slips. She's among people who get it. Who understand to some extent.

"What's the most expensive thing you've taken?" the blond girl asks, eyeing up her gold dress.

"I stole this Dior dress recently, although I'm usually too ashamed to even consider wearing it." Emerald gestures down at her dress as she tucks a strand of inky hair behind her ear.

"Bose headphones for me," the hoodie teen offers.

"Prada bag," the older woman says. "It's what got me caught."

Emerald elbows me when she takes her seat, shooting me a glare over my previous sex addict line, even though amusement twinkles in her eyes.

I chuckle to myself. At least she looks more relaxed.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here,” Amanda says. Then she gestures at Saint. “Do you want to share your story?”

“Um, I might pass today, if that’s okay.”

Amanda smiles. “Sure. No pressure. Maybe next time.”

The group shares a smile before Amanda asks the next person to tell their story. The meeting goes on, and my focus goes in and out as they all talk about different coping strategies as well as doing exercises to help them pinpoint what triggers them to steal. Emerald is fully engaged in it, coming out of her shell a little more as the minutes go by.

The meeting flies by, and when we get to the end, Emerald shocks the hell out of me by signing up for next week's meeting.

Amanda approaches her. “I always give these to newcomers.” She hands over a bunch of pamphlets and drops her voice to a whisper. “I personally found the top one very useful.”

Glancing down, I see the top pamphlet is about OCD, and I find myself hoping that Emerald has a read of it later. I look around the room as everyone heads to a refreshment table on the opposite side. “Ready to head out?”

She almost looks disappointed, but she nods. We walk toward the exit, and I hold the door open for her.

“So?” I prompt her.

A smile tugs her lips up. “It was...okay.”

I follow behind her, a hand pressed to the small of her back, feeling the warmth of her seep into me as I guide her to my car.

She lingers against the door. “Thank you, Saint.”

I look down at her and something warm skitters through my chest again. “I’m just glad it helped a little, Emerald.”

She looks at me, a thoughtful expression in her eyes. “Why do you care so much?” she asks suddenly.

My confusion must show on my face.

“I mean,” she explains, “most men would run a mile from a woman who’s responsible for three young kids and who’s got a stealing problem. So, why?”

Is it so that I can watch over her and keep her safe? I don’t know how to explain it beyond that. So, I simply shrug. “We’re friends, right?”

“I guess,” she says slowly.

It's hard to keep the slight smile from my face as I look at her. What is it about this woman that just hits me right where I feel so exposed and open? Like she's seeing some side of me that really doesn't exist. I'm not a man who usually helps anyone, so why do I want to help this woman...and why do I want so goddamn much to protect her?

"It was...kind of nice to talk to people who get it."

"Good," I say, unable to stop my hand from brushing the falling strand of inky hair from her face to behind her ear.

The hitch in her breath and the electricity that flows through my body make my chest ache. My pulse drowns out the noise of the city all around us. And my hand remains against her cheek.

All I see is her.

She's beautiful. No, she's *fucking breathtaking*. Stealing the air from my lungs without even doing anything.

The way her hair is lit by the golden hues of the sun setting behind her. The way her green eyes search mine, some emotions flickering behind them, making them sparkle. The way her lips part just slightly, the hint of pink from her tongue darting out to wet them. I zero in on that motion, tracking it with my eyes.

This is a bad fucking idea.

I need to keep my distance.

The alarm bells are ringing.

The sign is a big neon flashing red that says, '*Stop! Danger Ahead!*'

But my body and brain have lost communication. The chocolate scent that clings to her fills my nostrils as the heat of her cheek fills the palm of my hand. I lean down slowly, inching down until I capture her lips, my body moving on its own accord.

And damn, does she taste good.

Her eyes slip shut and mine follow before I press my body into hers, trapping her beneath me against the car. Her fingers curling into the fabric of my T-shirt. The heat of her against me short circuits the rational part of my head.

My tongue swipes over her bottom lip, begging for entrance, needing to taste all of her. Like I'm a starving man, and she's my salvation. I devour her.

I breathe her in until my lungs burn, and all I can see, taste, and smell is Emerald goddamn Fiorelli. Burning into every pore and cell. I press harder

into her, my fingers slipping into the hair at the base of her head, tilting her head to deepen the kiss.

And for some reason, it feels different this time. So damn different...

The sound of a car door slamming in the distance snaps me back into my body, and I pull back, panting.

My hand drops, and I stare at her.

Chest heaving, lips parted, eyes glazed. Fuck, if she doesn't look like perfection.

And all I did tonight was kiss her.

Fuck.

Me.

I clear my throat, stepping back. The cold air rushes in, claiming the scent and heat of her as I open her door and round the car without a word. I watch from the corner of my eye as her finger touches her lips and her throat works before she grabs the door and slips in.

Silence fills the car the entire damn drive. What do you say after kissing someone like that? No, not just *someone*. Someone to whom I know I can never give what she truly needs or deserves.

Before I can even process what the hell just happened, we're back at my mansion.

She's out of the car and making her way to the front door before I can even find the words I want to say.

I stare after her. My hand drags through my hair, musing the strands before squeezing the back of my neck. *What. The. Fuck. Just. Happened?*

I wait until she's disappeared inside before roaring back out of the drive.

The ride to the casino is a blur of lights and sounds, my thoughts a rollercoaster. The way she fitted against me, the scent of her, the taste. It's all branded into my memory. It's a miracle I even made it to my destination without crashing.

Arriving, I just sit there in the parking lot, pressed back against the leather seat.

I'm reading too much into it.

And yet, the way she looked afterward. The dazed look in her eyes, the flush of her cheeks, the way she melted against me. It all has my head fogging, and my jeans tightening. I close my eyes, but it doesn't help—the image of Emerald is too fresh in my mind to ignore.

It doesn't matter what's gone on between us before today.

Because with that one kiss tonight, she's managed to shatter any self-resolve I've ever had when it comes to her. And she reels me back in stronger than ever...

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

S AINT

After meeting with a source regarding some intel, I arrive at the casino late morning and head inside via the back entrance. I've taken over the office next to Christian's, and I've got a ton of urgent stuff to deal with today.

But reaching the office, I come to an abrupt halt in the doorway.

Because my tidy, immaculate space has been turned upside down.

There's various plastic toys spread on the desk and floor, stuffed bears fucking scattered everywhere, and the crystal decanter of my eighty-grand finest single malt whiskey is laying on its side and completely empty. *What the fuck?*

I march along to the staffroom and fling open the door. "Who the fuck has been in my office and made a fucking mess?" I roar.

And as all eyes turn to me, there's only one pair that I see. *Green and glittering.*

And before anyone can say anything else, two small voices pipe up in unison from behind Emerald. "Mr. Saint!"

What on earth are Jaspar and Giulietta doing here?

I wince, realizing the kids probably just heard my cursing, although neither seems to have taken much notice.

Emerald walks over. She looks tired, in the way that someone running on fumes does—all because of the stress that fucking creep, Carmine, is causing. Despite that, she'd look goddamn beautiful, but I'm not letting my

brain go there right now. “These two are off school today. Some teacher conference or something. Nicki was supposed to babysit them as I have a shift, but she’s sick and couldn’t do it.”

And the moment I hear her explanation, I feel like a complete douchebag for my over-the-top reaction. “I can look after them,” I blurt out. “I’ve got some work to do in the office anyway.” And my immediate offer shocks the hell out of me. But it comes so damn natural. And I know that’s a goddamn problem, but it’s not one I want to think about right now...

“I don’t want to put you out,” she murmurs.

And that makes me feel even worse. “It won’t be putting me out,” I say firmly.

And taking the two kids by the hand, I lead them back to the office, the other staff blatantly watching me with open mouths, not even trying to hide their disbelief. Okay, I know I’m a hitman and I can be a grumpy asshole, but what are they expecting? Me to assassinate two kids for daring to mess up my space?

Back in my office, Giulietta stares at me. “Your orange stuff is in the pot plant, Mr. Saint,” she announces.

My eyebrows shoot up. “*Excuse me?*”

She scoops up the decanter. “The stuff that was in here.”

I swallow hard. “*My eighty-thousand-dollar limited edition whiskey?*”

“Em tried to stop me. But I was too quick for her. Because I wanted to use this as my teapot.”

I gulp down the grumpy words that are on the tip of my tongue and say something else instead. “As your teapot for, er, what?”

Giulietta tilts her head to one side and looks at me like I’ve asked the dumbest question ever. “For a tea party, of course!”

Oh Christ, what have I let myself in for?

* * *

A few weeks ago, if someone had told me I’d be sitting awkwardly on the floor, sipping some overly sweet concoction of Kool-Aid and water while playing make believe with a five-year-old, I’d have shot them in the head after I finished laughing my ass off.

Now?

Guess I'm not laughing.

I shift uncomfortably on the hard floor, my thighs burning as I try my hardest not to grimace.

Giulietta sits across from me, sipping her 'tea' like she's the freaking queen of England. There's something so wholesome about the way she's lined up all the stuffed animals along one side of the table and laid everything out. The girl's got a thing for details, that's for sure.

"Cookie?"

I shake my head. "No, uh...*thank you.*"

I've already been scolded by her twice about manners. It'd taken all my willpower not to fall over laughing. I thought Emerald was something, but it's clear Giulietta gives her a run for her money. I take another sip from the small teacup, choking down the semi-grainy texture and thinking that Jaspar is a smart kid for refusing to join in.

I close my eyes briefly. This whole situation with Emerald is a goddamn problem. And yet I can't stop it even if I wanted to.

My dick is definitely leading the show when it comes to Emerald, or so I keep telling myself. I've never put this much effort into something like this. I've never offered to babysit a potential hook-up's siblings. I sure as hell never cooked meals for them or asked about their life beyond the meaningless chatter. I didn't even ask their names sometimes.

But with Emerald, it's different.

The whole situation is different. Something about her has the hairs on the back of my neck rising and my skin tingling. That warm feeling in my chest is only getting worse and worse when she's around.

Since they've all moved in, I've made it a priority to ask the kids about their day at school and make sure they have everything they need. I've been taking an interest in them, learning about them, wanting to get to know them—and scaring the fuck out of myself *because it's all actually genuine from me.*

And fuck me, seeing Emerald's face light up every time she watches us. It damn near made my knees give out the first time she flashed me that sparkling smile and grateful expression. I spent the next half a week trying to make it appear again and again. Because when she smiles, it feels like I'm wrapped in warm fucking sunshine, and it's a sensation that calms and soothes me.

She's an addiction, and it's an addiction I don't want to quit.

“More tea?” The small voice pulls me back into the room. How Emerald has managed to look after three young siblings until now, I’m not sure, but if I’ve learned anything about her, it’s that she’s persistent and resilient. Once she puts her mind to something, she does it. Whether it’s a good idea or not.

I stare at my nearly full cup, dwarfed in my much larger hand. It’s comical how seriously Giulietta’s taking this tea party, but I’m doing my best to play along and not to ruin it. When I started to care about impressing a five-year-old, I’m not quite sure, but here we are.

Deep down, I can see how it happened, but I’m not going to acknowledge *that* in the slightest. Giving it my attention means it might be real. And maybe, just maybe, I want it to be that, but I’m not sure where I stand with Emerald. And setting myself up for failure isn’t in my DNA, so the thought gets pushed into the back of my mind.

“No, I’m good.” I pause, looking at how Giulietta’s eyebrow arches in a way that mirrors Emerald. “But, um, thank you.”

She nods, satisfied with my display of manners, and my lip curls into a small smile.

“So...” I drawl the single word, taking another tentative small sip—I don’t have the heart to tell her she didn’t mix the packet long enough.

“So?” she asks in her piping voice.

“Who do we have here?” I tilt my head toward our honored guests.

Meticulously arranged along the table are a menagerie of bears, big and small, who crowd the space all around the small toy table. Thank God that the bears aren’t honey-colored...

When we began, Giulietta set them out with care, patting their heads and ensuring their cups were filled with the proper amount of ‘tea’ before giving each a small plastic plate. My heart clenched in my chest a little.

It’s the small things like this that keep catching me off guard. Between Giulietta and Jaspar, some part of me I was sure died a long time ago stutters like it’s trying to rise from the grave. A faint beating pulse trying to resurrect. Buried so deep down inside me, I didn’t even know it was there.

It’s a fruitless endeavor, and yet, that tightness in my chest grows every time my gaze sweeps over the kids. From the coloring, to the board games and now the tea party, that broken and barely alive part of me stirs to life more and more. Aching in some foreign way that causes a lump in my throat that I swallow thickly.

Giulietta gasps slightly.

And my eyes dart to her. Is she hurt? Did she do something? My eyes assess the situation. I pride myself on always being ten, fifteen steps ahead of everyone, but this one little girl has me doubting my skills.

“How rude of me!” she exclaims.

I blink and relax my tensed muscles. *Dramatic little thing.* And I can’t help the soft laugh that rumbles through my chest. That warmth spreads, and this time, I don’t shove it away, don’t let the ice crawl back over it.

“I didn’t introduce you to our guests.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I’m so sorry, good sir.”

My small smirk turns into a proper smile before I stop it. “All’s forgiven.”

She beams at me, and once more, that thud of my heart thumps in my chest, the uncomfortableness fading slightly with each minute that ticks by.

“They’re a family,” she says in a determined voice as she pats the first bear’s head. “This is Milena Bear. This is Jaspar Bear.”

Jaspar’s head lifts from where he’s doing a puzzle on the floor, and his small nose scrunches. “I wanna be a crocodile!” Obviously, he’s decided to join in now.

She swivels to face him and gives him what I assume to be the signature Fiorelli glare that Emerald’s shown me a good few times, before she turns back in her seat to face me.

“This is Giulietta Bear,” she continues as if her brother didn’t say a word. I nod and smile, and she eats up the attention before moving on. “This is Mommy Emerald Bear. And this is Daddy Saint Bear.”

And my world stops.

I’m not breathing.

I don’t blink.

Is this what cardiac arrest feels like?

The air in my lungs is sucker-punched from me, and I nearly tip back from the force of it.

My muscles lock in an uncomfortable position as I stare at the well-worn bear with the frayed bow tie. The room seems to shrink in on me, and I open my mouth to say something but can’t find the words.

“They’re a happy family,” she continues as if I’m not reeling, her attention solely on the bear with the bow tie.

Family.

An f-word that's always meant absolutely shit to me. *But it's everything to Emerald and her siblings.*

My face remains the same impassive mask that I've developed over the years. My eyes lift from the bear to the little girl before me. She smiles so brightly. Like she's proud of what she's just told me.

"Great," I breathe out, unable to find a better thing to say.

My brow puckers as I stare at the bear. *A happy family*, that's what she called it. Does such a thing even exist? Better yet, does such a thing exist *for me*?

And more importantly, why do I even care? I made my peace with never wanting or having a proper happy family in my life. I resigned myself to being what I am. Or so I thought...

My eyes narrow slightly as I stare at the bear. It's a stupid thing to think that if I stare long enough, he'll be intimidated like everyone else and give me the answers I seek. And I know that, but I can't help it.

Something shudders inside me, and I'm reeling. A loss of control. A foreign concept to me after so long of always being in sole charge of my destiny.

In the span of five seconds, that barely living thing deep inside me flickers to life, rising from the ashes of a loveless existence. Back with a vengeance. I shift and clear my throat to try and displace the uncomfortable feeling.

But it settles into my chest. *Want? Need? Longing?*

I don't know what to call it, but I fucking want it gone.

Don't I...?

Because the more I stare at the bear and the whole damn family of mismatched stuffed animals, I'm not so sure.

"Giulietta, um, what makes them a happy family?" What possesses me to ask her this, I'm not quite sure. But I suddenly need the answer. I've never felt like this, hanging on the words of a five-year-old the way I am now. Like some part of me is maybe stretching out for something just in reach.

"Well, they love each other very much. And..." She stops to think about it. "They have tea together. They play together. They do things a family does."

“Yup...that’ll do it,” I grit out. I squeeze my eyes shut as old images are dredged up in my mind one by one. The park. The movies. Running around the house on the broad shoulders of my dad. They’re so blurry and faded I’m not sure if they’re real or not. But the way they constrict my chest is very real. *It was a happy family.*

My eyes bounce between Jaspar and Giulietta, who are both oblivious to the storm rolling through me. Could I, could we...?

Fuck.

The way the idea sparks something inside me makes me shift uncomfortably. Emerald and I, we’re...complicated and new. Since kissing her outside the casino, making love to her in that motel, and moving her into my mansion, the way we interact has shifted. From banter to flirting and back again. But this just makes the idea of her—of an ‘us’—all the more alluring.

I bite the inside of my cheek. There’s no way I’m letting this go. That little broken boy inside me won’t let it happen, grasping onto this very dangerous and scary idea with his tiny fingers. And I’m not even sure the man I am today wants him to.

“And Emerald Bear and Saint Bear both take Milena, Jaspar, and Giulietta to the park to play, and to the children’s museum, and...and...to the movies. They teach them ABCs and sing songs together. And they have ice cream for dinner when they’re good.” Giulietta continues her explanation of what constitutes a happy family around the bite of a cookie.

“I see. And when they’re not having ice cream for dinner?”

“They eat pizza.”

“Of course. How silly of me not to know that.”

She giggles. “It’s okay. You’ll learn.” She pats my hand across the table, and I’m a goner for her just as bad as I am for her sister. I’m fucked. More fucked than I was before, without a doubt. Actually, I’m beyond fucked. God help me.

Movement to the left of us at the door catches my eye, and my body tenses. Despite the distraction of the tea party, despite the earth-shattering realizations, I’m not completely gone enough not to be aware of my surroundings.

My gaze flickers to the doorway, and heat crawls up the back of my neck.

Emerald leans against the door. “*Well, hello there,*” she says with a huge smile as she takes in the scene.

My heart thumps wildly in my chest as she just stares. Greedily I take her in, the way her dress fits over her luscious curves. The way she looks at Jasper and Giulietta with such a tender expression. “Joining us?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I have to go back out and do a few more things. Just came to see what everyone was up to. You guys look...cozy.”

“We’re having tons of fun, right?” I look to Giulietta who nods enthusiastically.

“I’ll let you guys carry on, then. I already took a picture to commemorate it and share to the group chat.”

She’s goading me, and as bad as I want to take the bait, I don’t. I lift a shoulder in a nonchalant shrug before turning back to the table fully. “We’ll finish up and then order that pizza, huh?”

“Yes!” both Jasper and Giulietta shout loudly with excitement.

And Emerald’s laugh fills the space before she leaves us to our little party once more.

* * *

When Emerald returns at the end of her shift, I carefully slide Giulietta from my leg where she’s made herself at home while we watch some cartoon movie on my laptop after eating pizza. “I should get going. I need to deal with some work stuff.”

Emerald looks at me and nods. “Sure.”

“Do you have to go?” Giulietta pouts. “We never finished the tea party...”

I smile down at Giulietta. “Yeah, I’ve got work to do. But if it’s okay with Emerald, maybe I can read your bedtime story tonight...?” My eyes lift to Emerald’s as I speak.

Something flashes across her face, and for a fraction of a second, I worry I’ve overstepped. Then Emerald nods, and the breath rushes from my lungs with relief.

My eyes flickering back to Giulietta’s, I see the little girl and her brother beam back at me, and their smiles remind me so much of the smiles their eldest sister gives me.

I stand, ruffling Jasper's hair as I pass him to grab my jacket from the back of the door. As I pass Emerald in the doorway, she leans against the frame. I arch a brow at her.

She steps into the corridor, closing the door to the office until just a crack remains open. "Thanks for today."

I shake my head, dismissing it. "Don't need to thank me."

"Well, I am. I mean it, Saint. I...I appreciate the offer to watch them while I was working. And for playing with them and all that."

The warmth in my chest thrums to life at the words. "No problem."

"Not everyone would have suffered however long on that hard floor like you probably did."

The smile on my face is involuntary and instinctual. I step closer to her, bracing my arm above her on the wall. "Delete the picture."

"Not a chance."

A low laugh rumbles through my chest. "I could just make you."

"Oh, and how are you going to do that? How do you know I haven't already sent it to the casino's group chat?"

"I can figure something out," I breathe, leaning closer into her. I watch as her breath hitches, and I can't help feeling pleased at the effect I have on her. "And I know you haven't—because you're not that brave."

"I'm not? Wanna try me? Look, win our next chess game, and I'll think about deleting it. Lose, and the only place it's going is the casino chat."

My eyes zero in on her lips, raking over her face before I nod. "Deal. I like it when the stakes are high," I growl in a low voice. The stakes are always high with this goddamn woman before me.

She smiles up at me, her eyes sparkling with a mixture of mischief and amusement.

My lips press to her mouth before I pull back. "See you later, Em. I'll be back before the kids go to bed."

My feet carry me down the corridor, and I will myself to keep moving despite the urge to turn back and claim her body like every fiber of me wants.

Jogging out to my car, I let out a long breath, and a low amused laugh leaves me at the same time.

God and all the saints as my witness, Emerald Fiorelli is going to be the death of me. But it's a death I can't wait for...

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

EMERALD

My knee is tucked under my chin from where I sit in the empty chair in our bedroom. Saint has been gone all day, leaving before I even managed to get up. And I miss him. Not just the usual morning wake ups I get—but also *him*. The warmth of him wrapped around me as he holds me. The smell of him when he ducks back in from the private balcony after a smoke or comes in fresh from the shower.

This is a mess, and it's supposed to all be fake. But for me? It's something real.

And I can see the way he looks at me. That flicker of emotion which is gone in a flash. He cares about me in some roundabout way. Otherwise, wouldn't he have pushed me off onto someone else to play house with?

Progress is slow, but I know I'm starting to knock those walls down. The way he is with the kids. The way he seeks me out at home to actually spend time together. That can't just be keeping up the act. Can it?

I bite my lip as my other foot skims the hardwood floor. Things with us are good. Surprisingly, so. But letting myself forget that he doesn't exactly feel the same way is a recipe for disaster.

I hear him before I see him. The distinct footfall down the hall, the way the door opens. It's late. A lot later than normal, but I knew he'd want to play a game if I was still up. So, here I sit, looking out the window into the

beautiful yard now equipped with a jungle gym, as the New York night sky greets me.

“Em?”

“Hey.” I smile, turning toward him. He looks...rough. For a man usually so composed, his mask is slipping more and more around me. Or I’ve just gotten better at reading him. “What’s wrong?”

“Huh?”

“You look...tired.”

The expression on his face morphs into something wicked. “Yeah, well if someone hadn’t kept me up all last night, I’d have gotten my beauty sleep.”

“Me?” I laugh as the memories of it flood me.

“Yeah, you, Miss Can’t Keep Her Hands To Herself.” He moves toward me, that dark gleam in his eyes doing nothing to settle the storm of butterflies in my stomach. Even after weeks of having each other, of getting to taste and experience Saint in the flesh, I still want more. I still *need* more.

“You’re one to talk.”

“I’m a perfect gentleman.”

I snort a laugh. “You started it last night, and then again a few hours later.”

He’s standing in front of me now. He traps me in the chair with both of his hands on either armrest. His lips brush the shell of my ear, and I suck in a sharp breath. “Is that a complaint? Because I don’t recall you telling me no.” His nose skims along my throat before he places a small kiss behind my ear. “Why are you up so late?”

“Waiting for you.”

“Yeah?” He laughs, and the feel of it against my skin only seems to drive me higher. “Why’s that?”

“Our nightly chess game, remember?”

His head turns toward the reset chessboard. “Okay. One game, then we’ll do something else.”

I roll my eyes, trying to play it off as if I don’t love the thought of that. He pulls back, taking his heat and scent with him. And I fight the urge to pout. “So, you going to tell me why you looked so rough?” I ask as casually as possible as I slide the pawn into position.

“Just...same shit, new day. Your move.”

My eyes drop to the board, but the ache between my legs is hard to ignore.

“Distracted?”

“What? No, I’m fine.” I move my piece forward.

“Yeah? You look a little flushed, Em. Something on your mind?”

“What?” I laugh, trying to focus on the board and not the way his eyes are zeroed in on me or the way they leave a trail of heat with each pass.

“You heard me.”

“I think you need to get your eyes checked. It’s just warm in here.”

The rich, dark laughter that leaves him makes my skin tingle.

I lift my gaze. And it’s a mistake. The brown of his eyes is already swallowed by his pupils. His mouth tilts in that sideways smirk that never fails to make me hot.

“Stand up, Emerald.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve got other plans for you tonight.” The way he slinks toward me is predatory. I scramble up from the chair and take a step back to the bed. He follows.

My heart races as we play this cat and mouse game.

I step back.

He steps forward.

His eyes devouring me until my knees hit the edge of the bed, and I topple backward.

“Would you look at that,” he murmurs, looking down at me, hand cupping my face. His thumb swipes across my lower lip. “Just where I want you.”

The way he says it combined with his thumb on my lip does something to my brain function. Permanently altering it. My lips wrap around his thumb, holding his gaze.

A gruff sound leaves him, and I can’t help but smirk. Looks like he’s not as in control as he thought. My tongue brushes the pad of his thumb as he swallows hard.

“I knew that mouth was good for something, Em...”

The rumble of his voice sends a wave of pleasure through my body. He pulls his thumb from my mouth. His body towers over mine. That spicy scent of his cologne driving all of my senses wild. He tucks my hair behind my ear, his knuckles brushing along the column of my throat.

He looks down at me for a second, eyes roaming before our mouths crash together.

Some heady mix of need and desperation with just a twinge of affection. He leans over me, easing me back into the bed. His rough hands grip the back of my thighs, letting my legs wind around his waist.

My hands sink into the strands of his hair as our bodies mold together, working in unison to get as close as possible.

I remind myself that this isn't anything romantic. But goddamn does it feel real, even if this is just some physical release of the tension that builds between us all the time. It's a sexual frustration that just needs release.

My body is sandwiched between him and the plush mattress beneath me, our tongues fighting for dominance as his hand grips my ass. A tortured whimper leaves me when he grinds against me, letting me feel how hard he is already.

Trailing his mouth against the heated skin of my neck and jawline, he licks at that spot beneath my ear that makes my body shudder. "Tell me you want me, Emerald." He bites a little harder, smoothing over the spot with his tongue to calm the sting. And a strangled sound leaves me, making him groan into my skin. "*Tell me you want me to fuck you, Emerald.*"

"You tell me." But my hard words lose their impact as I literally moan them.

Before my brain can process what's happening, Saint is hovering over me, his rough touch turning gentle. It never ceases to amaze me how he can go from hard and rough to tender and gentle.

"Yes or no, Emerald." His fingers play with the hem of my shirt, inching it up and down.

My heart hammering in my chest, my blood burns beneath my skin, making everything hypersensitive. "Yes. But..." I hold his gaze. "Can I?" My fingers toy with his belt.

"Fuck...yes."

He leans back until he's standing between my legs at the edge of the bed.

I sit up on my knees, watching him for just a moment. Taking in my feel of this man who's usually so composed but right now is falling apart piece by piece.

He helps me strip him of his shirt and pants until he's left standing in front of me in his boxer briefs.

God, this man. Lean muscle and hard angles make up every inch of him.

Holding my gaze, he takes himself out, tightening his fist around the base and giving himself a few languid pumps. I watch mesmerized as his stomach clenches.

“Keep looking at me like that, baby, and this is gonna be over real damn quick.”

I smirk at him. Because I like the power I have over him like this.

His other hand sinks into my hair at the base of my neck, and the other guides his dick toward my mouth. “Tongue out, baby.”

I do as I’m told, and I swirl the tip of my tongue against the head, tasting the salty tang there already.

He hisses, and his fingers in my hair tighten when I wrap my lips around the tip and suck gently. His hand moves deep into my hair. “Fuck, Em.”

The moan is low and loud. And just like that, I lose any ability to wait on his orders. Bracing my hands on the front of his thighs, I lean forward, taking him until he hits the back of my throat.

I swallow back the gag, trying to relax my throat, my eyes watering at the stretch.

A series of curses drip from his lips and echo around the room. His other hand sinks into my hair on the other side as I take over. My hand wraps around the base that doesn’t quite fit and moves it in rhythm with my mouth. I look up at him through my watery lashes, moaning around him.

His head falls back, the muscles in his stomach clench and flex, deep satisfying grunts fill the air as he drives his hips forward, nudging deeper and deeper. “So damn good, baby, so damn good. You’re fucking beautiful like this.”

His thrusts grow rougher, choppy, telling me just how close he’s getting. My hand drags up his thigh to cup his balls, and he’s a goner. “Hell, Em.” His hand tightens almost painfully in my hair, tugging at the strands as he spasms. I relax my throat and swallow everything he gives me, tears leaking from my eyes and my throat raw.

I suck down a deep breath as I wipe the corner of my mouth with my thumb, licking it clean. “Was that enough of a good use of my mouth for you?” I tease.

His laugh is deep, spearing me in a way that makes me feel that flutter in my stomach. I’m not used to him looking at me like that. His eyes are

dark and wild. God, does he look beautiful. “You’re gonna be the death of me.” Saint lifts my arms, pulling me back to my feet as he tugs my shirt from my body. “Off. Now.”

“So bossy.”

His fingers pop the button of my jeans as the fabric of my shirt puddles at my feet. He doesn’t waste any time pushing the material from me until I’m left standing in a pile of discarded clothing.

My entire body is thrumming with this frantic, untamed energy. His movements are so controlled, so slow and purposefully meant to torture me. His hands palm my breasts, fingers rolling my nipples as my body leans into him, brushing against him.

“Ask nicely and I’ll take care of that for you,” he murmurs into my ear. “And I’ll do it so good.”

I brush his hands from where they explore my curves, leaving that fire in their wake. I crawl to the middle of the bed, propping myself up against the pillows.

His knees drop to the mattress to follow, but I push my foot into his chest with a shake of my head.

He looks confused, his eyes narrowing as he moves forward. “Don’t play games, Emerald.”

“I thought you liked them?”

The growl that answers me makes me shiver. My fingers slip below the material of my thong, shimmying the fabric down my legs before tossing it at his chest. I can see the muscles in his jaw clench, that hungry predatory look filling his eyes.

His cock is already hard again. My chest rises and falls rapidly as I watch him pause when my legs spread wide, giving him a good look. “Jesus fucking Christ,” he says in a hoarse voice.

I smirk, teasing myself while holding his gaze.

He moves from the bed toward his discarded pants. He bends, pulling out a condom. Tearing the packet, he rolls it onto himself and stalks toward me.

My mouth runs dry.

Crawling slowly toward me, he settles between my thighs and reaches for the pillow to my left. “Hips up,” he orders.

My hips lift of their own accord, and he puts the pillow under the small of my back.

My teasing fingers slow as I forget what I'm supposed to be doing to myself because he's on his knees between my legs, my gaze sweeping those hard muscles sculpted by the Gods and the thick length of him.

"You want it?"

"Yes." I almost wince at how needy and breathless I sound, but he's my sole focus and my sole need. Him and what he's about to do to me.

Saint leans his body over mine, one arm supporting his weight and the other cradling my head tenderly. I reach between us, lining him up with my entrance, making us both shudder.

"I can be gentle," he whispers, affectionately nudging my nose with his before he kisses my cheek. "I can be slow and sweet."

I bite his bottom lip, immediately running my tongue over it. "Next time. I want it however you give it."

"You're fucking perfect, Em."

I squirm against him, desperately trying to dull the ache between my legs. "No, I'm not."

"You are to me, baby, and I'm the only fucking one who matters." He holds the side of my head, keeping his mouth against mine as he slides into me.

His mouth slots over mine, swallowing my cry as he stretches me slowly. "You're mine, baby, all fucking *mine*."

Our mingled pants fill the air between us as he slides in and out. Soft moans leave me as he rolls his hips. He pauses, and I whimper. I don't want slow and tender. I want Saint Veneti as he is.

He smiles down at me, a tender one, that makes me feel like I'm the only woman in the world. It makes me feel seen. My nails drag down the muscles of his back, and he groans before I move my hips. I'm more than ready.

He pulls back and thrusts forward again. He's slow, picking up the pace until all I can feel is him and me and where we connect. Deeper he pushes, and I cry out, digging my nails into his back as I arch off the mattress. "Oh my God..." He kisses along my neck. My legs tighten around him. "Saint..." I breathe out, needing more. I can feel sweat bead down my neck and the valley of my breasts. He's wound me up so much.

His head falls to my shoulder, where he presses his lips to my skin. He claims my mouth a moment later, a desperate clash as his tongue brands every inch of my mouth with his taste.

That familiar coil in my stomach tightens as I feel I'm getting close. I move beneath him, trying to match his frantic pace with my own. And my breath hitches when he hits that magic spot inside me just fucking perfectly.

In and out. We move against each other, panted breathing filling the air as he moves his mouth over me, tasting every inch of my neck and shoulder he can get. His tongue leaves a hot path before he brings his lips to the shell of my ear. "Come for me, Em. Be a good girl and show me how good I make you feel..."

That's all it takes. That gravelly timber of his voice in my ear and the way his cock keeps pushing against my G-spot. It's too much. And my entire body tightens as I cry out his name, my nails sinking deeper so that he hisses.

I can feel my inner walls clenching around him, and his hand slips into my hair as he tightens his fingers, pressing his forehead to mine.

"Fuck, you're beautiful when you come..."

But I can't form any words. I can't speak or even think. He thrusts again, once, twice, before I feel his body tighten beneath my fingers, a primal sound leaving him as he tumbles over that edge with me, and it's just enough that I shatter again, my first orgasm rolling into a second.

He pants against me before kissing my forehead. And just with that tender act alone, I know I am well and truly fucked in more ways than one.

A squeak of surprise leaves me as he flips me onto my stomach.

"I can't...Saint..." I moan, feeling blissed out and spent.

He chuckles darkly, kissing my shoulder, and he tugs my hips until my ass is up in the air. "You wanna stop, baby?"

I look over my shoulder at him. And biting my lip, I grin and shake my head.

"That's what I thought. Grab the headboard," he commands.

I reach out, grasping between the slats.

"That's my good girl..."

And my eyes close as I feel him thrust into me again. Yeah...Saint Veneti has me well and truly fucked.

* * *

I'm working behind the bar when Saint arrives for a meeting with Christian.

“Whiskey, please,” he orders.

I give him a sparkling smile as I grab a glass and pour his whiskey—neat because that’s the way he prefers it.

“You going on a break today, Em?”

Before I can reply, a man sidles up to the bar. And my stomach plummets. Because he’s the last person I was expecting to see here.

“Well, well, Emerald. Didn’t expect to see you here.” A man’s leering gaze runs up and down my figure. “Nice dress. You’re doing well for yourself. But then I wouldn’t expect anything less from you.”

I can tell that Saint immediately recognizes the man in the cheap suit. He’s Enzo Hernandez, my mom’s boyfriend.

“Is there something you need?” I grit out. I’m restraining myself, trying not to make a scene.

I notice Saint’s fists tighten. He knows all about Enzo, and I know he’s had a guy on him, digging up every last detail of his life, including his string of failed businesses, his gambling habit, his drug addiction, and the string of women he kept on the go while leeching off my mom. I just thank God that my mom has seen sense and finally broken up with him.

“The news reached me about your engagement,” Enzo continues in his slimy voice. “I just wanted to offer my congratulations and tell you how happy I am for you. It’s quite an accomplishment for a girl like you, especially with the parents you have. But then I always knew a girl like you would go far.” He extends a limp hand toward Saint. “Enzo Hernandez.”

Saint looks at it with disdain, not even bothering to lower himself to touch his greasy skin. “I know who you are.”

“Great, great. Look, I’ve got an amazing chain of upmarket dance clubs. I’m sure a man as smart as you can see the investment opportunity they present.”

Saint’s lip curls. He knows about his sleazy strip clubs. About how they’re mortgaged to the hilt and barely worth the price of the tacky paper umbrellas he sticks in the stupid cocktails he sells.

He holds out a stained, dog-eared business card to Saint. “I’d love to talk with you sometime soon and show you how you could invest with me and quadruple your money within three months.”

“Yeah, I know all about your businesses,” Saint rumbles.

His chest puffs out.

“About how you exploit desperate underage girls to work in your clubs, and when they try to get out, you blackmail them with videos you’ve secretly taken of them with your customers, threatening to put them up on porn sites and send copies to their families.”

Enzo gives a nervous laugh. “Hey, the little bitches know what they were signing up for. And I can’t help it if the little sluts want to earn some extra money by offering their pussies and assholes to whoever will pay them.”

Saint snorts. “You’re forgetting to mention your guys who pimp them out to your customers and take a cut of the fee for your pocket.”

“It’s a good business model,” he slurs, clearly already wasted despite the early hour.

Saint’s hand twitches by his side. “Let’s get one thing clear, shall we, Enzo? I would never lower myself to do business with a man like you. Although ‘man’ is too generous of a word to describe someone like you.”

And when Enzo realizes Saint’s not interested, he swings his gaze back to me and his eyes narrow to slits. “Emerald always has a way of cozying up with rich men. So, how did she hook you? She probably uses the same tricks as her mom...”

I start to say something, determined to stand up for myself and not let him talk about me in such a way. “Enzo, you are disgusting and a complete creep. Why don’t you just—”

But Enzo raises his voice to talk over me. “I bet she reeled you in by showing you a good time with her tight little pussy. Shame I never got to give it a go. I would have loved to have been the one to break her in. But then, I should have just offered to pay Emerald because everyone knows how much she loves money—”

And Saint pulls his gun and makes the snap decision there and then to end his pathetic, measly life. Pop! Pop!

There’re gasps all around, murmurs of shocked whispers, and a shrill scream or two as I look down as the puddle of rapidly expanding red.

Christian comes running out from the back office, and taking one look at Saint and the scene around him, he gives him a ferocious scowl. “For fuck’s sake, Saint, couldn’t you have at least done it outside?”

But Saint merely smirks as he downs the rest of his drink.

People are looking at the scene as Christian barks orders into his cell for a clean-up crew. The Imperiosi’s cop contacts means the authorities will

turn a blind eye to this. And I know killing is wrong, but I can't help being glad that Enzo is no longer going to be around to cause issues for my family and me...

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

S AINT

I push open the front door, fully expecting the usual chaos of paws skidding across the hardwood floor and the boisterous barks of my dogs.

But instead of the usual blur of black and white fur, I freeze at the sight that greets me.

My jaw drops like an out-of-control express elevator hurtling to the ground.

Fuck me.

What the fuck?

Fuck. Me. Did I already say that?

Because both dogs are sitting in the middle of my grand entryway, staring at me with their bright blue eyes, their tails wagging just enough to show they have no clue how utterly ridiculous they look.

And they do look absolutely fucking ridiculous.

Serial is wearing a hot pink, glittery tutu skirt that barely covers his fluffy haunches, while Killer is sporting a purple tutu that sparkles and glints under the soft glow of the overhead light.

I blink.

Once and a second time.

Then I clench and unclench my jaw and try to suppress the fury that's threatening to escape.

"Emerald!" I yell as I step fully inside.

I shrug off my jacket, still staring at the dogs, unable to take my gaze off them. But they seem completely unbothered by their new attire.

Emerald saunters into the entryway, far too casual for my liking. "Did you *holler* for me?"

"Emerald, what in God's name is this?" I growl.

There's no immediate answer as she tilts her head to one side and just looks at me.

She's fucking enjoying this.

And I might just have to goddamn kill her.

"Why the hell are Serial and Killer—er, I mean, Pumpkin and Poochie—dressed like a pair of glittery hoes?"

Her eyes widen. "You shouldn't call them hoes—"

But before she can say any more, I hear the soft scamper of little feet and then a high-pitched giggle.

My stomach tightens.

Because I already know. Oh Jesus, Mary, and all the saints, please save me from this, and I promise I'll never kill anyone ever again...

Giulietta skips forward until she comes to a stop in front of me, her hair falling over her face and her tiny hands clutched together in excitement.

Her big, round eyes shine as she looks from the dogs to me, then back to the dogs.

"Do you like it, Mr. Saint?" the little girl asks, bouncing on her toes.

I glance at the dogs again. Serial whines, clearly uninterested in any of this nonsense, while Killer flops onto his back, kicking his legs like he's fully embraced the absurdity. Try as I might, I still can't get used to their new names of Pumpkin and Poochie.

I exhale and rub the back of my neck. "Er, well..." I start.

But when I look back at Giulietta, her face is so full of hope. So damn eager for my approval.

Emerald looks at me. "She spent all afternoon dressing them up," she says. "It was...a battle of wills."

I snort. "And the dogs lost?"

"*Clearly*," Emerald clips.

Giulietta rushes up to Killer, throwing her little arms around his huge, fluffy neck. "The doggies look beautiful," she insists, pressing her face into his fur. "Just like pretty princesses."

My chest tightens in a way I'm not sure I know how to handle. I wasn't expecting to grow so attached to this little girl. Wasn't expecting to get used to the sound of her giggling in my house, the way she clings to me when I read her a bedtime story, and the way she looks up at me like I'm a fucking superhero. *I wasn't expecting to get this attached to any of them.*

I shake my head, finally allowing the chuckle that's been building to escape. "Yeah, kid. They look...good."

Giulietta beams at me, and it's a beautiful smile just like when her eldest sister smiles. Because whenever Emerald smiles at me, it's like the sun coming out from behind a fucking raincloud and sprinkling beaming rays across the whole damn sky.

But I'm still not ready to admit yet just how much this little girl, her siblings, and Emerald have wormed their way into my heart...

* * *

Emerald's cry of pleasure fills the room, and a shiver skitters down my spine as something primal and dark rolls through me. A possessive and hungry thing, knowing that I'm the one who wakes up to her like this. Who makes her fall apart again and again.

"When do you have to leave?" I rumble, brushing away the inky strand of hair clinging to her forehead.

"Like ten minutes ago," she grins widely as she comes back down from the high.

My eyes move to the alarm clock on the end table, and I can't help but groan. I want to keep her here with me all day, but I roll from over her and watch as she moves toward the bathroom.

As soon as she's showered and dressed, she runs out the door to take her mom to her medical appointment. She's still trying to convince her to go into rehab, and I know it's going to take up most of today.

Between her leaving and me cooking and setting a stack of pancakes on the breakfast table, Emerald texts and calls to remind me at least seven times that Jaspar and Giulietta don't have school today. As if I could forget that.

I watch the kids devour the pancakes. "Any ideas on what you two want to do today?"

“Play!” Jaspar yells. “But not with you.” Jaspar says pointedly, and I bite back a laugh. Things with him are still colder than a blizzard at times. Today’s my chance to finally finish my personal assignment: Mission Win Jaspar Over. How difficult can it be? I mean, I deal with dangerous and difficult people every day, so how hard can it be to win over a freaking six-year-old?

“Okay, so play but without me. Anything else? The zoo?”

“The zoo smells,” Jaspar huffs.

“It’s got animals,” I sigh. “What do you expect?”

Giulietta wrinkles her small nose. “We expect all animals to smell like roses. Just like my teddy bears.”

I feel like pointing out that her stuffed toys smell like flowers because she keeps drenching them with Em’s perfume when she thinks no one’s watching, but I decide to keep that thought to myself, not wanting to ruin her rose-tinted view of the world.

Later that day, I try again. “Ever played chess?” I ask Jaspar, after Giulietta announces she’s going to play with her bears.

“No.”

“With a smart brain like yours, you’d be a natural at it. Wanna learn?”

He looks at me, head tilted. Something in his eyes flickers before they narrow just slightly. “Okay.”

As I pull out a chess set, I watch Giulietta get down to the serious business of having a tea party, this time with apple juice instead of Kool-Aid. She affectionately talks to the family of bears, and each time I look at them, my chest gets tighter.

Family.

I shake my head. I can’t think about that right now. “You ready?”

Jaspar nods eagerly, standing beside me. He barely comes up to the table’s height, standing on his tiptoes to see over the edge. I laugh, picking him up and placing him on my knee.

“Better?”

He nods.

“We’ll start pretty slow, okay?”

Jaspar eyes the board, picking up the carved pieces one by one. “Why are they all different shapes?”

“Because each piece does something different. You have to be able to tell them apart.” He sets the piece down as I push forward a pawn into the

center of the board. "This is a pawn. It moves one square forward at a time. Unless it's that pawn's very first move because then, it can move one or two squares."

"It can't go backward? Why not?"

"Well, it can be good to get them to the other side of the board," I explain.

"Why?"

"Because when it gets to the other side, it can become a queen, bishop, rook, or knight."

The scrunch of his nose shows his intense concentration. "Is that a good thing?"

"Yeah, it can be."

He nods pushing another pawn forward on his own. "Why only one square?"

"That's the rule."

"What about this one?"

"That's the knight," I say.

"Why is it a horse?"

"Because knights ride horses."

Jaspar nods, settling on my lap a little more.

"The knight moves in an 'L' shape. Like this." I show him by sliding the knight up one, then over one. "He's a pretty special piece. He's the only one who can jump pieces."

"He jumps?"

"Yeah. He moves over them."

Jaspar's eyes widen. "Like a ninja?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Silent but deadly."

Jaspar hums before moving the knight in the same way I did.

So on and so forth, I move through the pieces and their basic moves.

Jaspar inundates me with questions, and I answer the best I can. "You're a good teacher, Mr. Saint."

"Oh?"

"I don't like you still. But you're a good teacher."

"I'll take it, kiddo."

He turns back to the board to move through a few of the simpler moves I explained earlier. The kid's a natural, but I'm not surprised. Emerald has a sharp mind, and it only makes sense that's Jaspar would have the same too.

A while later, we hear Emerald's voice call out. "Hello?"

"In the den!" I reply. My brow puckers. Is it really that late already? I lean a little back in the chair, trying to get a look at the clock on the console table.

"Oh, I thought you guys were out..." Looking at the scene, around her, Emerald giggles, and my body tightens at the sound. It's a straight shot of sunshine and ecstasy combined, and I wish I could bottle it up and keep it forever. She moves into the den, and I feel her body against my back as she looks down at Jasper and me, a big smile on her face. "What are you doing?"

"Mr. Saint is teaching me to play."

"Oh, he is, is he?"

Jasper nods. "He's a good teacher."

"Yeah? He's alright, I guess."

"High compliments all around," I say dryly, snagging Emerald's wrist to keep her beside me. "What do you think, Jasper, should Emerald play me?"

He nods his head eagerly.

She rolls her eyes before sitting across from me. Giulietta wanders over as well, joining us. She climbs into Emerald's lap and beams across at me.

With a wink, I reset the board and motion for Emerald to start.

Emerald moves her pawn forward and holds my gaze. That smirk on her face tells me she's not going to go easy on me—and I wouldn't have it any other way.

I follow her eyes as they move to Jasper in my lap, and as I watch her smile, something warm slides through me.

And emotions which I don't want to acknowledge I know how to even feel—and don't want to admit I actually long for—sink into me.

Acceptance.

And feeling like I belong.

* * *

I start thinking about what I've done to get Emerald to move in with me. How I told her that she had to be my fake fiancée. There's something wrong with me. I'm broken and mangled. I've been lying for so long to people that telling the truth feels...wrong. It makes me an asshole, I know, the way I'm

lying to Emerald about this whole damn thing. About how I'm lying by not telling her how I feel about her.

But this is the only way to keep her safe—at least, that's what I keep telling myself.

And there's no way she would stay with someone like me. Someone who's cold and emotionally cut off. Emerald needs a real connection, and she needs affection and love. And she certainly can't get it from me.

How hard is it to just tell her that this isn't fake...? That she's mine. That no one is going to ever touch her.

I know I need to tell her. But telling her means that this is real. That she can walk out on me. Because who'd want someone as damaged as me?

I try to push those thoughts away. But Christian's original objections to me being with Emerald scream in my head. He wasn't wrong then, and he's not wrong now. But the moment her name fell from my lips in his office that time, there was no going back.

Am I setting myself to crash and burn?

A hundred percent.

But I'll take whatever I can get.

Because whether I admit it to her or anyone else, Emerald has me. Hook, line, and sinker...

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

EMERALD

When I wake up, Saint is already in the shower, but I find a small box next to my pillow.

A smile tugs up my lips up as I sit up against the headboard, the box in my hand.

Opening it carefully, I lift out a small chessboard keychain. It's kitsch and obviously came from some cheap gift shop. It's a stupid thing to give someone, and yet I can't help the way my heart stutters.

I open the folded note and read Saint's handwriting. *Congrats, Anna Muzycuk. You're beating me sometimes now.*

A laugh bubbles from my throat. Anna Muzycuk is a chess grandmaster, and I admire her greatly. Something flutters in my chest. I'm taken aback that he'd even take the time to do something like this. It's moments like this, moments where the cool guy of Saint melts away, that you get just a glimpse of something softer beneath. A rare occasion that makes my body tingle and heart pump faster, knowing I'm the only one who's seeing it so openly displayed.

And with a shake of my head, I push myself out of bed and get ready to start my day.

* * *

Soft music hums in the backyard as Milena continues to move through the choreography for her lead role in the school's end-of-year performance. Some fresh take on the *Twelve Dancing Princesses*, it has Milena continuously practicing lines and dance moves.

Saint's fingers brush idly along my leg as we nestle on the lounge on the deck. The younger kids are busy running around with Saint's dogs in the open space in front of us.

"That pamphlet Amanda gave me was really interesting," I say. "It says that people with kleptomania have a higher chance of also suffering from OCD because both are linked to strong compulsive and impulsive qualities. I'm going to keep going to the group, but I've decided I'm going to start CBT as well."

It's really hard for me to actually say 'OCD' out loud. It's hard to admit to my issues. Because then I also have to face up to them. But something makes me feel like I'm stronger now and that I'm in a place to face my fears.

"I'm proud of you, Em."

And I give him a genuine smile as we continue watching the kids and dogs.

Over the last week, something has changed.

Some switch has flipped.

My feelings are different than before...more intense. He walks into a room, and my attention zeroes in on him. He smiles, and I turn into a puddle of goo. He talks to me, invests in a conversation with me, and my heart thunders in my chest. It's a lot more than just a physical thing anymore. Somewhere between the mind-blowing sex and the soft conversation that follows, the icy layers of Saint have melted.

For Saint, the lingering touches, heated glances, and kisses are just for show.

But for me, it feels real.

And it's a real that's terrifying and thrilling...

* * *

That night, we've just come into the bedroom to go to sleep when I turn to face him. "Saint, this is...real."

He blinks. "What?"

"You. Me. What we're doing." I let out a deep breath, holding his stare. "It's not fake. I mean... I don't want it to be fake. I want it to be real."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

My heart races in my chest, and I'm almost certain he can feel it. "I'm in love with you, Saint." My words are so soft, so tentative. "Saint, it hasn't been fake for me for a while. And I..." Again, I'm not sure what to say. I just thought I could pretend. But I don't want to pretend anymore. I don't want something fake. I want something real. With him. However he can give it, as long as it's him. "I don't know when it happened, but it did, and I don't want to pretend anymore. I don't want to pretend that any of this between us is just for show."

His thumb brushes against my bottom lip. "Say it again."

"What?"

"*Say it again.*"

"I love you?"

His head bows against me, and his eyes slip shut. "You beautiful, aggravating woman. This hasn't been fake since you moved your gorgeous ass into my house."

I blink, feeling some mix of confusion and elation. "*What?*" The word puffs out between us as his lips ghost mine.

"You heard me." His lips skim across my skin. "You're perfect. Beautiful. Addictive. Mine. *You're mine, Emerald Fiorelli, and I'm never going to let you forget it.*"

My head tilts back as my eyes flutter closed as he presses against my mouth.

"Hits and killing used to be enough for me. But then I got bored of the kills. And now, you're the only thing that makes me feel high. You're my addiction. Your smiles. Your laughter. *You.* You're like sunshine chasing off the rain, and being with you lights up everything in my whole goddamn life. And I know that I want and need you and your smiles in my life forever."

Saint's lips kiss a blazing trail along the column of my throat. Each kiss is soft, tender, worshiping my body and combusting every nerve within me.

"Mine, and I'm not letting anyone else have you..." He laughs with a deep growl against my ear as his hands begin exploring the curves of my

body. Every inch of me sets on fire, and I arch my body into his, needing more, wanting more. Only ever with him.

He pulls back with a dangerous smile. “Strip. Now.”

I lick my lips, watching him as he pulls from me, and I whimper at the loss of contact.

“Now, *Emerald*.”

The way he orders me sends a flash of something molten through my body. I hold his gaze as my clothing flutters piece by piece to the floor. I take my time rolling my thong down, knowing his hungry gaze is on me, addicted to every detail.

The look he gives emboldens me as I let the fabric fall from my fingers to the floor. An appreciative hum leaves him.

My heart stops as I watch him discard his clothing. His hand wraps around his hard length. My eyes track the way he pumps himself, my core clenching, needing and wanting him to soothe the ache.

It feels like I’d been waiting for this moment since we started this weird journey. Since he picked me up in that stupid car. And maybe in the back of my mind, I’ve always been toying with the idea of this—although I never admitted it, even to myself.

This idea of an ‘us’ completely consumes me.

He steps closer to me, and I stand there, breathing raggedly.

“On the bed. Legs spread wide open,” he orders.

A delicious shiver moves down my body as he looks me over and drinks in every detail.

“*Bed. Now.*”

“Or what?”

His lips tug at the corner. “Or you’re going to have to find something to hold on to while I spank your ass.”

I back up to the bed, holding his gaze with each step, before I crawl to the middle of the mattress, spreading my legs for him. Giving him a view of the wetness that soaks me.

“*Good girl.*”

When he says those words to me, they’re my undoing. I’m hooked on this man. *I love him.*

“Pay attention,” he grits out at me.

Blinking, I look up at him. His features are strained with impatience. I’d gotten lost in my musings about him, but goddammit, he’s something else—

and all fucking mine.

He hums again, claiming my mouth as he looms over me, his body primed to take what it wants. His tongue finds entrance once more, and we duel and fight for dominance, fingers roaming, neither of us willing to give up control—until I submit and allow him to take the lead and deepen the kiss.

A rough hand at my jaw angles my head further, sending a gush of heat in its wake. My mind fogs with desire, my blood heats another ten degrees, and each stroke of his thumb against my jaw sends thrumming electricity coursing through my body.

Every fantasy I'd ever had of him these last few weeks, every craving that's caused heat to pool in my body, is finally coming to fruition.

He feasts on me, and I can't get enough of him. Every nerve ending is firing in rapid succession, and the ache between my legs beats even fiercer.

His hand moves from my jaw to my breast, kneading as his mouth trails down my neck.

His rough fingers twirl around my sensitive nipple, drawing a low moan from me.

He chuckles against my jaw before repeating the motion on the other breast. "Your tits are so damn responsive..."

His mouth replaces his fingers as they trace slowly down the sides of me, caressing my hip and the tingling flesh of my thigh. "Fuck, Em...so wet just for me?"

Words evade me as a groan slips from me, my back arching. Sliding my hands around his broad shoulders, I sink my nails into him, holding on for purchase as his thick fingers pump into me without warning.

Finally, some relief... But it's not enough.

"More," I moan.

He rubs at my clit before inserting another finger deep inside me. Moving it in and out, again and again, until I'm writhing against him, desperate for release.

"Saint..." I swallow thickly. "I need...I need..."

"I know." His fingers stretch me, and he cups my breast with his free hand. He pinches at my aching nipple, and I gasp once more. His mouth moves from my breast, trailing down my stomach as his tongue leaves a wet path down the middle of me.

"Please..." I plead, my fingers sinking into his hair.

I can feel him smirk against my skin. "I know, baby..."

His words puff against me, and my eyes roll back into my head. With a long lick, he traces circles around my heated bundle of nerves that are aching for attention.

Swiping back and forth, up and down. Worshiping every inch of my core like some starved man. His hands wrap around my thighs, pulling me against his mouth.

My head falls back, and I can think of nothing but Saint. Of his mouth on me. Of his body against mine. And as I arch my hips to meet him, he sucks so hard that I nearly shoot off the bed, his dark chuckle vibrating around my thighs.

His tongue continues its languid exploration of my core, his teeth scrapping just lightly against my clit to send me into another stratosphere, and stars explode behind my eyes as my fingers curl into his hair tighter.

"More..." I groan, grinding into his mouth harder. "Saint!" I scream as I come, my body tensing and spasming.

And with one more lingering lick, he pulls away from me. "*You taste like mine, baby.*"

But all I can do is nod, my brain no longer functioning.

He kneels between me, his hand pumping his hard shaft up and down.

"Please," I whimper. I want him. Need him.

"Please what?"

I glare up at him. "You know."

"Say it."

"Fuck me."

He drags his tip between my folds, and I shudder. "Nicer."

My head falls back, and I groan. *This man can be so infuriating.* My body is on fire, hotter and burning hotter yet.

"Say it nicely, Emerald," he orders.

"Please fuck me?" I offer.

He drags the head once more through my folds, and I nearly come undone again. He leans slightly to the side like he's about to move. My hand latches onto his wrist.

"I need you, Saint." I see a smile of satisfaction flit across his face. "And I'm clean and on the shot."

He groans, looking down at me. "Fuck, Em, you're gonna kill me." And whatever he sees makes his chest heave with a ragged pant. "I'm clean too."

“Good. Now, Saint, fuck me.”

“With fucking pleasure, Emerald.”

His hand smacks my thigh as he spreads my legs as wide as they’ll go, yanking me toward him. I grip the bedding in my fists, waiting to feel him enter me. And in one long thrust, he’s buried half inside me.

The rumble that leaves him causes every muscle in me to clench.

Another push, and he’s fully inside me. The stretch, the heat of him, the scent of sweat and sex in the air only add to the sensation. It’s too much and not enough at the same time.

“Fuck,” he breathes, his mouth moving to scatter kisses all over my skin. Goose bumps spread like wildfire every place he touches. And then he begins to move. Arching to meet him, my nails dig into his shoulders.

I can feel my next release building. The rumble in his chest becomes a deep moan as he pumps, stretching me further. The lust that swirls between us fogs my head. But it’s more. Because every move of his hips as he drills into me is followed by a rush of ecstasy and something else. Something that makes him feel made for me, both of us lost to the sensation of each other. Animalistic and primal.

“Faster,” I grit out.

“No. I don’t want to hurt you, Em.”

“Move, dammit.”

A chuckle reverberates through him, and his hips start slamming faster, the bed banging into the wall over and over again. Panting fills the air, and I’m lost once more to the sensations of our bodies. I am his. Completely, utterly, and fully. And knowing this is totally intoxicating.

Our mouths connect once more, teeth scraping and pulling at each other’s tender flesh. His tongue slides in and thrusts just like his cock, branding him to me in every part of my body. This is everything I secretly wanted, and I give myself up to him.

He pushes further, deeper. His hands grip my thighs, lifting them to angle deeper with each thrust. Stars bloom behind my eyes as I squeeze them shut.

“Mine,” he growls against my ear. “You’re mine, Emerald. All fucking mine.”

“Yours. Please,” I beg.

Maybe it’s the way I beg him or how I suck him into me that pushes him over the edge because he releases a roar that shatters me. His body

tenses over mine, and absolute pleasure falls over his features, easing the hardened lines. He continues to pump inside me once, twice, three times more, before slamming me straight into my own shattering release, my hoarse scream echoing around us.

His breathing is ragged as his hands slip beneath my thighs, and he pulls me over his body. I'm pliant and relaxed, barely keeping myself up. "C'mon baby, you can give me another."

"Saint," I pant, "It's too much. It's too good. I can't..."

"Are you a quitter, baby?" The taunt just riles me up further. "Ride me, baby, and show me I'm yours."

A coy smile lifts my lips as I look down at him. His head falls back, and I relish the way he relinquishes control to me. I sit up straight, sliding down on his dick slowly until I've taken every inch. His head lifts, looking at where our bodies join. Not a sliver of space remains, and I smirk wider. "You mean like this?"

He nods and grips my hips tighter, his mouth parting in a silent expression.

I swirl my hips, grinding down, and his breath hitches. "Who do you belong to, Saint?"

"You."

That single word is thrilling. I spread my legs a little wider, feeling the stretch as he moves deeper. His eyes roll back into his head, and I place my hands on his stomach, lifting myself up and down, again and again.

The rhythm is hard, relentless—just like before. With every rock of my hips, the way he meets me with his own buck of hips is too good and too much.

"Baby," he pants. "I'm gonna...*fuck*..."

I move faster, finding the perfect rhythm between us. His hips snap up as I come down, and my head falls back as I shatter around him, and the roar that leaves his mouth only makes me come even harder.

Collapsing onto his chest, I can't find my voice. I reach up, brushing my fingers against his jawline. "You're mine." I pant.

"*Yeah, Em, I'm yours.*"

My body is tugged close to him, and we're a tangle of sweaty limbs and silky sheets. His fingers drift through the strands of my hair, soothing me and lulling me to sleep. His lips press to my forehead, and I can feel my eyes droop.

“You’re utterly amazing, Em.”

I look at him, and the expression on his face makes my skin heat again, that ache within me returning anew.

He cups my face, thumb brushing my cheek.

I smile, lowering my head back down to his chest. And the steady yet elevated heartbeat of him beneath my cheek makes my smile grow wider.

This is where I belong. Right here. His fingers drift down my spine, up and down in a soothing rhythm. The sound of our breaths fill the space, and I’m almost certain he’s falling asleep beneath me.

“Marry me, Em.”

I blink, lifting up to look at him again.

“What?”

“Marry me.”

My brow furrows, and I look at him, trying to determine if he’s actually serious.

“*For real. Marry me,*” he repeats. “I’m not built for opening up, letting someone in, supporting them emotionally. You know that already. *But you should also know that you’re the only woman for me, Emerald.*”

I can’t help my smile and laugh. Of all the places to propose to someone, only Saint would do it after sex.

“Is that a good laugh?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s a good laugh.” I press his lips to mine, and my hands cup his face as I deepen the kiss for a second, my tongue sweeping into his mouth before pulling back. “Yeah. I’ll marry you.”

His lips spread into a smile, the genuine kind that has my body lighting up like a Christmas tree because I know I’m the only one who gets these smiles. “Good.”

And this is what it feels like. To be in love. To be wanted. To be seen. And nothing has ever felt so damn right like it does with Saint.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

S AINT

Emerald moving in with me made a liar out of me. I was trying to pretend that I wasn't developing feelings. But everything about her is fucking perfect. Her quick mind, her sense of humor, and the way she can keep me on my toes or go blow to blow with me. I can't wait to marry her. Which makes today all the worse.

The flat of my tongue runs over my teeth. It's one thing to just forget. It's another to be shown up by her goddamn ex.

I drag a hand through my hair and suck down a deep breath.

This isn't how it was supposed to go. A better partner—*fiancé*—would have known that today is Emerald's birthday. Would have planned some romantic bullshit date and swept her off her feet.

But not me.

Nope. *I've fucked up.*

Instead of planning something to blow all her other birthdays out of the water, I'm stuck scrambling to find something, anything, to make it special. This isn't how I operate. This isn't like me. I'm the man who's on top of everything, five or ten moves ahead of everyone else. I don't get blindsided.

But that's not what's spiking my blood pressure. It's the fact Ronnie fucking Mainetto is sending Emerald red roses and a honey-colored teddy bear on her birthday, while I didn't even get her a card. What the hell is he doing sending her flowers anyway? And a fucking *teddy bear*? *Really?*

Sure, they get on fine when they run into each other at the casino, but she said that whatever happened between them is water under the bridge. I glare at the vase on the kitchen counter where she put them after they were delivered. It's a beautiful arrangement. But that's not the point. The point is they're from him, the man who tossed Emerald aside without even thinking about her feelings. The fucker who she was crying over in a parking lot, for fuck's sake.

My teeth grind together the longer I stare at it.

Red. Fucking. Roses.

Of all the goddamn colors to send someone, he chose the one that makes my stomach churn and vision blur.

My fist balls tighter.

Red. The color that's supposed to be reserved for romantic partners. Is that what he wants? He didn't want her before, but now that I have her, he's having second thoughts? The thought of Ronnie even touching Emerald again, of him hearing the way her laughter fills a space, of him listening to the sounds she makes when she comes, makes my stomach turn to lead.

Over my fucking dead body.

Or his.

Either way, he won't get to touch her. Ever.

I suck down a deep breath, feeling my lip curl at the corner as I stare at the damn vase of flowers. "Fuck this."

My fist knocks the vase over, smashing it into the counter. The sound of shattering glass doesn't bother me. The house is empty, with the kids at school and Emerald out with Jacquetta and Nicki for a girls' birthday brunch.

My boots crunch on the pieces of glass that have clattered to the ground as I sweep my hand through the remnant of the vase, not caring if the glass slices me or not.

The petals look like blood against the white counter stone, and I bite back my snarl as I let them fall beneath my feet.

I grab the bear, and it goes in the trash, along with what remains of the flowers and the goddamn birthday card with its long message about their good times together and how he hopes she's happy.

Asshole.

That dark possessive thing inside me roars with satisfaction, and alongside it, the green monster smiles with satisfaction. I suck in an inhale

and tuck my gun back into the waist of my pants.

If this is what it's going to be like, then the world needs to know I'm not a man to fuck around with. If Ronnie wants her, he'll have to take her from my corpse. Because Emerald is mine—and only mine.

I might not be sentimental like Ronnie. I might not be able to give her that same connection, but I'll be damned if anyone else tries to fill in the gap I can't.

The wild look in my eyes makes me pause as I pass the mirror in the hall. It's not a look I've seen on my face before.

I narrow my gaze.

This is a problem.

This feeling that's eating me alive.

This feeling that's galloping through my body like a pack of wild horses.

Jealousy.

That's what it is. Ronnie offers something I can't. Some mental connection that's so emotional and entwined with their past, I can't compete with it. I'll always lose.

I scrub my hand over my jaw before letting out a deep breath, trying to ground myself. But it doesn't help. I'm worked up, and agitation tightens my body. I need a smoke, a drink, or a good fuck.

Or all of the above. With Emerald.

But that'll have to wait until I get this shitty day over with. My phone vibrates with yet another message from Christian about urgent matters that need my attention, and I know I can't avoid the casino anymore.

Ronnie better hope he doesn't cross my path today because I won't be held responsible for the fist he'll eat if he does.

* * *

Arriving home from work later, I let the door bang open. And I stop mid-step as I come face-to-face with Emerald.

Her expression is stormy, her eyes narrowed. The bear, a wilting rose, and the card are clutched in her hand. "What in God's name, Saint?"

"What?" I say with a casual shrug of my shoulders.

She holds the ruined gifts and stares at me. "What on earth is wrong with you?"

"Lots of things. But you already knew that."

She follows me up the staircase to our bedroom. "Why did you throw these in the trash?"

"Why did you accept flowers from your ex?"

"It was a birthday present."

"From your goddamn ex."

As soon as she sets the crumpled birthday card on the dresser, I pull out my gun and shoot it to smithereens. *Pop!* The honey-colored bear is fucking next. Two quick *pops*, and the stuffing litters the dresser top just like the card.

"Jesus! Can't you just find a human to kill and leave my bear alone? You don't like roses, bears, or being nice to kids at grocery stores. You're crazy, you know that?"

"Why is Ronnie sending you red goddamn roses? I didn't realize you two were getting so cozy again. Something I should know?"

She blinks at me before her face screws up again. "*Excuse me?* You're blaming me because you're acting like a psycho?"

"Answer the question."

"You first!" She gets louder when she gets angry. I don't.

I turn to face her now, my shirt half undone. The sleeves are dotted with blood from an already shitty day turning worse. The muscle in my jaw ticks, and I narrow my eyes. "Why is Ronnie sending you flowers?" I repeat, a dangerous chill to my voice.

"Because it's my birthday? Because he's being nice? Because we're friends?"

"Friends?" I bark out a laugh. "You're not friends with exes, Emerald."

"Well, I am."

"The hell you are."

"What on earth does that mean? Do you think I'd lie about what's going on with him? I'm not you, Saint! I don't lie to people."

"Watch it, Emerald," I warn, stepping toward her like a predator on the prowl.

"No, this isn't okay!"

My nostrils flare as I glare down at her.

“You can’t just throw my stuff in the trash like this. They don’t mean what you clearly think they do. Ronnie and I are *friends*. Just because you’re being a grumpy jerk doesn’t mean I should pay the price.”

Something about her words slices into me. The green haze clouding my mind parts just slightly, and I swallow.

“They were just flowers. Jacquetta and Christian got me flowers as well. You going to throw those away too?”

“No,” I huff.

“Then what’s the problem with Ronnie’s?”

“Because they’re from him!” My voice booms around the room, and her eyes widen. “Because they’re *from him*, Emerald. A man who literally tossed you aside like trash! Do you know how hard it was to watch you deal with that? And now things are just what? Hunky-dory between you two?”

“What’s this really about, Saint?”

“It’s about the goddamn red roses your *ex-boyfriend* sent you.”

“No, *it’s not*.”

My hand balls into a fist. Why does she have to push this? Why does she have to prod and dig and keep going for the kill even when she knows what lies beneath isn’t pretty? “Fuck!” I drag my hand through my hair as I turn from her and pace. But ‘fuck’ doesn’t even begin to cover it.

“Why, Saint?”

“Why, what?” I pause my pacing.

“Why did you do this? And be honest for once with me.”

The dig doesn’t go unnoticed. If anything, it cuts me at the knees. My hand scrubs at my jaw before I finally work up the courage. How has one woman managed to smash through everything the way Emerald has? How can I let her in to see me like this, knowing that all remains in me is some empty fucking pit?

“Fuck,” I hiss. I look her in the eyes. “Fine. You want honest? You want the goddamn truth? Fine!” I step toward her, watching as she backs up toward the bed.

I step forward.

She steps back.

“Because I can’t do that shit, Emerald. Because I can’t ever be the man who brings you flowers and a sappy as shit card for your birthday. I’m not capable of it. This is what you get. And that’s it.” My arms spread wide.

“This is the man you’re going to marry. The physical stuff, I’ve got you. But if you want the emotional stuff, I can’t do it.”

She blinks at me shaking her head. “That’s a damn lie.”

“No, Emerald, it’s not. This is probably the most honest I’ve ever been with you.”

She sits on the side of the bed. “Why? Why can’t you give me that?”

I sigh. My body deflates slightly as the anger and jealousy dissipate. I drop to the bed beside her, hanging my head as my hand rubs my neck. “I don’t know any other way to be.”

“This all seems like a rather extreme reaction to red roses and a birthday teddy bear, don’t you think?” she says slowly.

A harsh laugh leaves me as I look up at her. “That...might have been more than just jealousy.”

“You don’t say,” she replies in a dry tone as she looks at the remains of the bear she’s clutching.

I shake my head. “It’s not important.”

“It is.”

“Please, Em...” My voice cracks, and I clear my throat. “Please, don’t push this.”

“That’s not how this works, Saint.”

“Why do you have to be so goddamn stubborn?”

A small smile tilts her lips. “Because I love you, Saint. I care about you. Just explain it to me. Please?”

The softness of her smile soothes some of the heated fury within me, although bile burns my throat at the thought of peeling back my perfectly crafted shell. Of showing her even a glimpse of the man I am beneath it, scared and broken.

“When my parents...died, they used red roses at the funeral.” The words stick in my throat and feel like thorns tearing it raw, each word more painful than the last to grit out.

My mind can’t help wandering back to the day when I turned five—and my childhood fell apart, and I lost my innocence forever. Emerald doesn’t say anything, but her hand squeezes mine, so I tell her about the memories that won’t stop haunting my mind...

It's my fifth birthday today, and I can hardly sit still. I tug on Mommy's shirt and beg, "Can we go to the park please?"

"Sure we can, poppet," she says with a smile, "but it'll have to be later because we need to finish setting up for your party first."

Daddy nods in agreement—he's busy blowing up balloons while Mommy's pinning the streamers on the wall.

"But I really want to go now...please, please, please?" I plead, my eyes wide and hopeful.

Mommy and Daddy exchange a look. Finally, Mommy smiles and says, "Alright, it is your birthday after all."

"Yay!" I shout, jumping up and down with excitement.

I love the park—it has swings and slides and the big grassy field where I can run as fast as I like. The best bit is the hill that the slide's on. Daddy and me lie sideways on the hill and then let ourselves roll down it. It always makes me giggle so much. Daddy taught me this as he's really good at making up fun games.

Mommy makes a small picnic to take with us—peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and some of the cookies she baked this morning.

While she packs the basket, I imagine how I'll soon be running across the grass, kicking my red ball as hard as I can, and watching it soar through the sky.

I hold Mommy's hand as we walk out to the driveway, Daddy on the other side of me as he reaches down and ruffles my hair. The sun is shining bright, and I'm bouncing up and down with every step.

I climb up onto the backseat of the car, barely able to contain myself as we buckle up—my birthday is turning out just perfect. Mommy's baked my favorite chocolate cake and iced it with double chocolate frosting, and then this afternoon, I'm going to have the most awesome party and get to open my presents. Today is going to be the best day ever.

I reach into my backpack to make sure my ball is there. My heart skips a beat. "Mommy, I forgot my ball!" I wail.

"It's okay, poppet," she says. "You can run back inside to get it."

I scramble out of the car as Daddy presses the button that opens the garage door. As I pass Mommy's window, I wave bye. "Bye, Mommy! Bye Daddy!"

Mommy giggles as she gives me an affectionate smile full of love. "You don't need to say bye to us, honey—you'll only be gone for a minute."

Skipping through the garage, I go through the door that connects to the house. I can't find my ball in my toy box, but then I remember I was playing with it in the den yesterday because it was raining outside.

Running to the room at the front of the house, I see it behind the couch. Scooping it up, I go to the window and hold it up proudly so that Daddy and Mommy can see that I've found it.

Daddy gives me a thumbs up, and Mommy gives me one of her beautiful beaming smiles.

A split second later, before I can move from the window, a car comes screeching around the corner and gunfire erupts.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

The windows of Daddy's car shatter.

Mommy and Daddy hurl back against their seats.

Panic erupts in me.

Dropping the ball, my little legs pump as fast as they can as they propel me back outside.

As I reach the driveway, all I can see is shattered glass and Mommy and Daddy lying deadly still in the car with their eyes wide open and blood everywhere.

My body automatically throws itself toward the car.

But a neighbor arrives and holds me back. I'm screaming and crying, trying to get back to Mommy and Daddy.

But I never see them alive ever again.

It's my fault that my parents were in the driveway. If I hadn't asked to go to the park, they wouldn't have been in the driveway when the bad guy came—instead, they would have been safe in the kitchen at the back of house.

It's all my fault...

And before I know it, the days have passed in a blur, and then I have to say goodbye to them at the cemetery. And it's a goodbye that has to last forever.

I'm standing under the leaden skies which are threatening rain. My suit feels stiff and foreign around my five-year-old body.

In one hand is clutched a red rose, and I'm trying hard not to stab myself with its evil thorns, while my other hand grips the arm of my favorite honey-colored teddy bear.

Next to me is my uncle, but despite his presence, I'm completely bewildered by what's going on around me.

I hear the prayers being said, but everything feels like it's seeped in a thick fog. But this is my reality now.

Because my reality is that my mommy and daddy are dead.

And I've been left all alone in this world.

All because of what the adults keep calling a drive-by shooting.

People are swarmed around me—the family and the men my daddy worked with. I'm not sure exactly what Daddy did at work each day, but I think it's why he and Mommy got shot.

I choke back my tears, trying to keep them at bay as the two expensive caskets are lowered into the black ground. I've managed to keep my tears back all morning—in the church, while people murmured words I scarcely heard, while memories of the people I love most in the whole wide world tumbled through my mind.

Because my uncle's told me that it's not okay to cry. He says we're made men, whatever that means—I think it's something to do with Daddy's work. But I do know that I'm expected to be strong and brave.

The rain is falling now, heavy drops pelting down on top of us and turning the soil darker and muddier.

"Throw it onto the caskets," my uncle commands with an impatient jerk of his chin toward the grave.

I throw the red rose and bear down to my mommy and daddy.

A rough laugh leaves my uncle. "You were supposed to throw just the flower, not the bear as well. What would your parents want with a teddy?"

I realize my mistake and fall to my knees upon the muddy ground and look down into the big gaping hole. "I have to get my teddy back!" I cry out.

"Too late for that," he says, laughing again. "It's gone forever."

And then he sees the tears I can't hold back any longer.

"Stop crying, you big baby. You can't be crying over a dumb toy."

I'm crying, but not about the teddy bear. It's about my parents, of course. About the mommy and daddy I've lost forever and never going to get back. About the parents who're never going to wake up again. About the two people I need the most...

After explaining this all to Emerald, I look down at my hands. "I see that moment in my dreams every damn night. Over and over again, the darkness

just swallowing the rose, the bear, and...my parents. It's like the darkness is lying in wait to swallow me whole too. That was the..."

I clear the emotion from my throat, trying to work past the way it's choking me.

"That was the last time I cried. The last time I cared about anything like that. Veneti men aren't weak—and that's weakness." I shake my head. "I lost my parents forever that day. It's what makes me this emotionless and cold man. And it's what makes me a great assassin."

Finally, she knows. This should make it easier now. But the longer I stare at her, the more I can see the emotions battling in her mind.

"I get why you're like this, Saint—and why the teddy bear is now another name scratched off your hit list, but..." She shakes her head. "No, no buts. I get it, and I appreciate you telling me so I can understand what's going on with you." She smiles at me, but for once, it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "I need to get ready for my shift."

"Wait, you're working on your birthday?"

"Just for a few hours. You didn't say you had anything planned."

"I, uh, do have something planned." Another lie. "But we can do it later." She nods before moving into the bathroom to shower and change.

I stare after her, unmoving. I rack my brain, trying to think of something that shows her I can do better than this for her birthday. Because if I don't figure it out, don't figure all my shit out, I know I'm going to lose her. My jaw tightens. That's not happening until I'm six fucking feet under.

The drive from the house to the casino is quiet until I say goodbye to her as she gets out of my SUV, and the drive back is even worse as I'm left alone with my thoughts. I promised her something amazing when she gets back home. And it needs to be something that tops goddamn red roses and a fucking cutesy bear.

When I get back to the mansion, Milena suggests we all bake a birthday cake for Emerald.

"Do you think she'd like that?" I ask, completely unsure of what's the right thing to do.

Milena nods, flashing a thumbs up. "Totally. Having something homemade is way better than store bought."

I rub the back of my neck, staring at the recipe she printed twenty minutes ago.

Jaspar and Giulietta stand on footstools beside me, looking over the paper like they can read more than a handful of the words.

“What else?”

“The cake is only step one,” Milena replies. “We all made Emerald cards today. You can make one too. She’ll love it.”

“I can help!” Giulietta pats my hand as if to reassure me that I’m not alone, and I nod slowly. At least with the help of the kids, maybe I won’t completely suck at this.

“Okay. You’re sure? This isn’t...too cheesy?”

“Nope. Emerald loves this stuff,” Milena carries on. “It’s romantic, and everyone wants to be romanced. Plus, I’m sure you already got her an amazing present.”

“Uh, well, actually...”

Milena sighs, muttering under her breath about having to do everything and shows me her phone screen. A necklace with a small glittering diamond pendant in the shape of a chess queen fills the screen. “If you order it now, it’ll be here in a couple days. Just tell her it’s coming in the mail, so that’s why you haven’t got it already.”

That doesn’t really seem to solve the problem I’m having. It’s not the gifts. It’s the other shit. The touchy feely crap that seems to come so naturally to them all. I don’t know how to let someone in like they clearly do. I let out a heavy sigh.

“You just need to tell her she’s as pretty as a princess!” Giulietta pipes up.

“No, that’s stupid, Giulietta,” Jaspar says, sticking his tongue out. “You should tell her she’s smart. Or tug on her hair. Mrs. Harriet at school says boys do that sometimes when they like girls.”

“Let’s, uh, keep brainstorming, huh?” I suggest, not sure what to make of most of these ideas. “And let’s make this cake.”

I look back down at the piece of paper in front of me. Well, here goes fucking everything. Laying myself bare for Emerald and doing sappy shit like this. All just to prove to her that I can be the man she needs...

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

S AINT

A few days have passed, and I think I've managed to make things up to Emerald after forgetting her birthday.

I walk into my mansion, Leoluca and two captains following me. We have business to discuss, and I lead them to my office

But as I reach the doorway, I come to an abrupt halt. "What the fuck?" I mutter.

I steal a glance at the men and scowl at them as I see amusement dance across their expressions. "Don't say a fucking word if you want to keep your balls attached to your bodies," I hiss, but that doesn't stop them from smirking.

My eyes widen into saucers as I stare at my tasteful, distinguished, book-lined office. Well, that's what it *used to be*...

"*Emerald!*" I holler from where I stand.

She appears a minute later, giving me a full-wattage smile and batting her eyelashes, looking like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. "Yes, fluffy bunnykins?"

I glare at her. "What have you done with all my antique furniture? My art deco desk, bookcases, and all the other things?"

"Oh, right, those..." She waves a dismissive hand in the air. "I donated them to Goodwill."

“*You. Did. What?*” My jaw drops down. “They were rare antiques.” My voice starts to rise. “Do you have any idea how long it took to source them and how much they cost?”

She shrugs. “I can guess.”

“I can’t believe you just gave them away, but even worse is what you’ve replaced them with!” As the men fail to hold back their snickers, I look with horror at the gold desk, fluffy pink chairs, fur-covered notebooks, and gold pens topped with unicorn heads. “*What the actual fuck, Emerald?*”

“Do you like it?” she trills at me.

“No, I don’t,” I rage. “It’s tacky, trashy, and a complete travesty of style!”

She’s holding the black Amex in her hand, tapping her gold-painted fingernail against it. And an awful thought crosses my mind. “How much, er, did this all cost exactly?”

“Only three million,” she replies in a singsong voice.

“Three million dollars?” I utter. “*For this awful shit?*” The men are falling about laughing now, not even trying to hide that they’re finding the whole situation fucking hilarious.

“The desk is plated with real gold,” she replies as if that justifies the outrageous price tag.

“Is this your idea of a joke, Emerald?”

“No, of course it isn’t. And you know, you did...want me as your fiancée.” Her voice breaks a little. “And I thought that you would like it and that you wouldn’t mind me spending your money.” Tears start to glimmer in her gaze.

And I suddenly start to feel bad. “Oh, Em, of course I don’t, um, mind you spending my money, and I, er, love what you’ve done with this space.”

“Really?” Her voice hitches a little as she tries to hold back her tears.

“Yes, really. You’re my fiancée, and you’ll soon be my wife. You mean the absolute world to me, and you can spend my money on whatever shit you want if it makes you happy.”

And then she throws her arms around my neck and gives me a long, lingering kiss.

* * *

After the men leave, Emerald comes to my office door. “Did I do okay, Saint?”

I burst out laughing. “You did great. Those captains will tell their families, and their wives are two of the biggest gossips in the Imperiosi. They’ll love to tell everyone what happened.”

Emerald nods. “I can hear them right now, saying you’re so madly in love with me that you let me spend millions of your money on utter trash. If this doesn’t start convincing people that our relationship is real, then I don’t know what will.”

“It will definitely convince them,” I tell her. “We just need to keep the charade up until I can find a way to get rid of Carmine once and for all. By the way, you didn’t really spend three million dollars, did you?”

“Nah, it was just a couple hundred bucks.”

“Good.” I cast an eye around me, and a frown puckers my forehead. “I know this was the plan, but I didn’t expect it to be quite, um, this bad. What on earth possessed you to choose these colors, Em?”

She tilts her head to one side as she gazes at me. “The gold is obviously because I’m a gold digger, duh.”

I groan. “Please tell me that you haven’t redone the rest of the house in this style...”

She looks at me like I’ve suddenly grown two heads. “Of course, I haven’t. Because then I’d have to look at it every day as well!” And she giggles in that glorious way of hers.

I shake my head as a smile spreads over my face. My plan is working, and if I have to put up with a gold and pink office for a while, then I’m willing to do it. Because I’ll do whatever it goddamn takes to keep Emerald safe.

* * *

We’re playing a game of chess. I love the game with Emerald. The back and forth. The chase. The exhilaration she’s brought into my life.

The small smile on her face has my chest tightening. Because when we play together, any ice between us thaws just a little more.

The board sits between us on the bed as we play. Emerald ponders her next move from where she lies on her side. The light from outside the small

balcony illuminates her from behind. I try to keep my thoughts from wandering, but it's no use.

Her smile grows as she takes my pawn, waving it in the air between us like a taunt.

"Careful. You don't want to do that," I warn.

"Oh, but I think I do, Valentino. I like knowing I'm beating you."

My eyes drop from hers to the board, then back up. "Don't get overconfident now. The game is still early."

"Uh-huh." She drops the piece into the small pile on her side of the board with a satisfied smile.

"Remind me again who normally wins?" I murmur.

Those green eyes glitter at me. "I'm getting better against you. You've had an unfair advantage since lying and stalking my online games, remember? So, shut up and move your piece."

That warm feeling that's been missing roars to life in my chest. This is what I need, whatever the fuck it is between Emerald and me. She shouldn't be this addictive. She shouldn't be this comforting. But she is. With anyone but Emerald, I'd have dropped the whole thing ages ago. But this woman somehow has a way that keeps drawing me back in.

"You gonna make a move or what?" she clips as I mull over the moves in my head, too distracted by her to really be thinking clearly and almost certain she's going to win because of it. I look up at her and then back down at the board.

"Tick. Tock."

"Emerald."

"Valentino."

"Don't rush me. I can't think if you keep talking."

"Now, that's a lie." And she smiles that grin of hers that makes my whole body coil tight.

"Shut up, Em."

"Make me."

The words fly from her lips, and my gaze snaps up to hers. I can't tell if it's a taunting joke or serious. "You're playing a very dangerous game right now," I say in a low voice.

"If you don't like me talking, then make me stop."

It's an invitation if I've ever heard one.

Her eyes observe me as if she's trying to figure out what I'm going to do.

It's the small subtle hitch of her breath. The way her chest rises and falls a little faster helps me decide before I stalk over to her and roll her under my body.

* * *

There's a knock at the front door. I open it to find Christian standing on the doorstep. And his solemn expression instantly puts me on high alert.

The world is still for a fraction of a second when Christian informs us of what he's come to tell us.

There was a shooting by a cartel member a couple of hours ago.

Ronnie was shot.

And he is dead.

I don't really give a reaction. What am I supposed to say? It sucks, but that's how these things go in our line of work. I didn't like the guy much to begin with.

Emerald, though. Her reaction is painful. Tears start and quickly turn into a sob before she excuses herself and dashes up to our bedroom.

Three hours later, she still hasn't appeared.

I knock on the door. "Emerald?"

No answer.

I open the door a creak, peering into the darkness. Emerald's body is hidden under the bed covers, but I can hear the way she sniffs.

"Em?"

Again, no answer.

It's concerning that she's this distraught. Maybe it's the first dead person since her father that she's known personally. My brow crinkles as I step into the dark room.

"Em? Give me a sign you're breathing here."

She briefly lifts her head from the pillow. The mascara she's wearing is smeared and her eyes are red.

I'm not sure how to be comforting or consoling. "These...things, um, happen, Em."

A small sound leaves her before she looks away again.

“Em...” I move to reach for her.

“I just want to be alone for a while please.” Her voice is soft.

My hand freezes midway, dropping to the bed between us. “Right.”

I move away from the bed. Why is she acting like this? They were friends, but she swore it was just friends and nothing more... “Are you going to eat?”

“I’m not hungry, thanks.”

The progress we’ve made feels like it’s stalling. That birthday cake. The necklace. The card that took me fucking hours to write. And everything in between it—dates, late night conversations as we play chess, telling her about my life before.

I close the door behind me without another look back.

“Milena?” I knock on her door. “I’m going out for a bit. Pizza is on the way.”

My steps are heavy as I turn down the hall, jog the steps, and go out the door before I even hear her respond.

I need out. *I need air.*

This isn’t a normal response to someone dying. Sure, a bit of upset when you hear the news. But crying for a few hours? It’s like she’s shutting down completely. I don’t understand emotions that well, but that’s what you do when you...love someone.

I check my phone before sliding into the SUV. I need a distraction, and luckily for me, one just landed in my lap.

The sound of Emerald’s sob haunts me even in the car. The music blasting through the speakers doesn’t come close to drowning it out. My hands tighten around the steering wheel. Every muscle tenses. I want to help her, to give her the time she needs to grieve, but I can’t help that ugly feeling in my chest. The one that keeps telling me this isn’t a normal reaction to your friend dying.

She’s acting like the love of her life just died.

The thought is like a wave of cold water hitting me. Of course. Of fucking course.

I circle the building on the industrial estate, scoping out my newest target. Again and again, I circle, unable to clear my head enough to actually do what the fuck I came to do.

I should be looking for the exit strategy. I should be planning my move. I should be focusing on how I’m going to get the information I need from

the bodies that no doubt fill the space.

My eyes narrow. Knuckles whiten more. I grip the leather wheel harder, hearing it creak under the strain.

“Fuck!” I slam my hand against the steering wheel edge.

But I know I need to get a handle on myself. Be controlled, calm, collected. Be indifferent and aloof. Because without those things, I’m as good as dead. And I have to remind myself that Veneti men are strong—unfeeling and ruthless.

I repeat it in my head like a mantra. Like that will quiet the beast bubbling in my chest that wants me to turn around and confront Emerald.

My teeth grind harder, and it’s a miracle I haven’t cracked a molar.

Of course, she was still in love with him. He sent her happy birthday cards and didn’t struggle to write them. He made her laugh without much effort whenever they bumped into each other at the casino. He and she talked still about everything under the sun. He let her in. He was emotionally available, and now, he’s gone.

A bitter part of me is glad. Glad that Ronnie is out the picture, and I didn’t have to dirty my hands to make it happen. Glad he can’t steal Emerald away from me anymore.

I park the SUV, trying to focus on the building. Trying to do my damn job. Pushing all those thoughts behind me and back into the goddamn box where they belong. I take a deep breath, clearing my mind.

There are two exits, and about four yards between the warehouses. Not enough cover.

I roll the sleeves of my dress shirt up before I open the SUV door, hands shoved into my pockets as I walk up to the building.

This is the distraction I need. This is just the thing to get me back to the man I need to be to survive this world.

Thirty minutes later, I’m hardly paying attention as the man pleads beneath the barrel of my gun. The warehouse is filled with bodies now. Not all dead but certainly worse for wear.

I keep thinking about how Emerald still loves him. He’s dead, and she still loves him.

She said she loved me, but I know she won’t ever love me like that.

How can she? She built a relationship with Ronnie. They had an easy back and forth. But me? Emerald only knows what I want her to know

about me. It's the briefest hint of my life. And that's it. That's got to be enough.

But it's not.

How can it be? She needs someone who isn't cold, isn't emotionless, isn't missing a heart.

Emerald clearly needs more than what I can give her. Wants more than I can offer her.

But I'm too far gone, and there's nothing in this world that's going to take her away from me now.

Fuck emotions.

Fuck that special connection she had with Ronnie.

She knew the man I was when she agreed to marry me.

She knew what I offered.

I fire off a round above us in warning. "Answer the fucking question. I'm running out of patience, and that's a pretty bad thing for you right now." I'm not in the fucking mood for this. I'm not in the mood to listen to a grown man blubber about God and forgiveness. They're not even high up in their organization. They're lowly foot soldiers, and no one will miss them if they end up in some shallow grave. "Tell me who paid you twice the normal fucking fee. And where they got the money?"

"I-I..." He stutters as I shove him hard with my boot pressed to his chest. "I don't know. We never saw his face!"

"Well, find out!"

The man scrambles up, and I let him. So much for a nice easy distraction, for trying to cool off before I get back to the house to watch Emerald wither away, knowing there's nothing I can do to help her or stop this.

She wears my ring, but her heart isn't mine.

And it never will be.

"Fuck!" I kick the table with a growl, the money they were counting scattering all over the floor. My chest heaves and puffs, and I know I look like a wild man. I am. Emerald goddamn Fiorelli makes me this. She broke me and ruined me.

Worse yet, I let her. I let her, knowing that what she and I have was never going to go any deeper than what it is now.

The SUV door slams behind me as I rev the engine.

But I can't go back like this. I can't face her knowing that I have her in every way that should count. Except the one I want—the one I'm not capable of getting.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

EMERALD

I haven't left the bedroom. Saint hasn't come home tonight. Things are weird between us. It's like Saint can't comprehend that it's perfectly normal for a person to grieve the loss of a best friend.

Milena knocked what feels like days ago, telling me that pizza was here, but I ignored her. My eyes are puffy and red. My mouth feels like cotton balls have been shoved into it. My skin is pale and resembles ash. I grip the edge of the sink on the bathroom as I stare at myself in the mirror.

Ronnie is gone.

Really gone.

There's no getting him back. No more conversations about stupid things that don't matter. None. Poof. Everything's gone.

It's really hitting me now.

It's like the initial shock has dissipated, leaving only sadness behind. And it's a sadness that's consuming me.

I lurch as the world spins. This is the third time I've lost what little remains in my stomach. I press my forehead to my arm as I suck in a deep breath.

"Em?"

"Yeah?" I croak.

"Um, we're heading to bed. Do you...need anything?"

I turn to look at my siblings all clustered in the doorway and looking at me.

I shake my head, not trusting myself to open my mouth and not puke my guts again.

“Do you have a tummy ache?” Jaspar asks softly.

“Did you eat too much candy?” Giulietta asks, the caring lilt to her voice pulling at my heart.

“No, you dummies, she’s sick.” Milena sighs at them. “We’ll leave you be. If you need something, come let me know.”

I bob my head, and it’s a mistake. I swallow thickly, breathing harshly through my nose.

“Is Saint sick too?” Jaspar asks Milena.

“Is that why he’s not come home tonight?” Giulietta adds.

“I don’t know. C’mon, I’ll tuck you in,” Milena replies. Their conversation fades, and once more, I’m left by myself. I suck in another gulp of air before sinking to the ground. I sit there on the cool floor for a second, trying to get rid of the taste of bile from my mouth.

I didn’t think I’d cry so hard for Ronnie. And I hope Ria’s okay despite all the times she’s been mean to me.

With another deep inhale, I push to my feet. Maybe I’m just starting my period on top of all of this. That’d explain everything—my overwrought emotions and feeling sick. But it seems pretty late in the month for that.

What if...

I freeze.

My head feels congested and heavy, but I mentally go through the days of the week, counting as I go. That’s not right. It can’t be right...

I risk moving into the bedroom slowly to grab my phone. I flip open the calendar.

“Fuck.”

My word is a whisper as my phone clatters to the ground.

My legs turn to Jell-O, and I just barely make it to the bed as I sink down. This is bad. This is really bad. This is freaking bad.

I mean, we haven’t even talked about it. We were safe. Always. Right?

My head spins, and I feel bile rise up my throat again, but I manage to swallow it down. This doesn’t mean anything. I could just be late. I’ve been busy and stressed with everything going on. I mean, that’s it. That has to be it. This is just down to stress. There’s no reason to jump to conclusions. My

period has been crazy before. A week or two missed when the stress at home and with my mom got too overwhelming. This is just like those times.

I have a spare pregnancy test somewhere. I always keep a couple, just in case. I remember once having a scare when I was with Ronnie, and having to go out in the middle of the night to buy a test didn't help my nerves, so I resolved to always keep a spare test at home in case the need ever arose again.

I rummage through a box in the closet. I never got around to unpacking it. I find spare cosmetics, winter sweaters, various paperwork, and then what I'm looking for—the pregnancy test.

I pray Saint doesn't come home just yet. I don't know if I can face him right now. I get that Saint's not good with emotions—maybe that's why he doesn't understand what I'm going through. I mean, Ronnie's *dead*. He was one of my best friends. Yeah, we didn't work out as a couple because he was truly shit as a boyfriend, but we were best friends before that, and we eventually managed to go back to being best friends after that as well. It's like Saint doesn't get that guys and girls can just be friends. I know we have history, but I was one hundred percent over all of that.

I know I'd also be this upset if Jacquetta and Nicki, my other best friends, died. I would be just as distraught. Would Saint show such a lack of understanding then as well?

I sigh and head into the bathroom. “Okay. Just pee on the stick. It's not hard,” I murmur to my reflection in the mirror, trying to psych myself up. If the mental gymnastics I did are right, I'm almost two weeks late. *It's just stress*.

The timer is set, and I lean against the wall, tapping my foot up and down. Every little noise in the house makes me jump.

Three minutes is an eternity when the only thing you can think of is how it better not be positive. Because I don't even know if I'm ready for a baby. I mean, one day, but not now when I have my siblings to look out for and when my relationship with Saint is so up and down. This isn't how it's supposed to happen. When did it even happen? I'm on the shot, so it seems impossible, right?

I'd say it was an Immaculate Conception, but I'm not the religious type, and Saint's not a god even if he thinks himself one. Gnawing my lip, I try to think back. We've been fairly active—perhaps a little excessively—but it's hard not to give in when he knows just how to play my body.

The buzzer of my phone fills the space, and I scramble to shut it off quickly. Holding my breath, I wait to hear if anyone heard it blaring. My chest heaves. One second. Then two. I relax slightly and close my eyes.

“Okay, it’s gonna be fine,” I whisper, trying to will my eyes to open. I lift an eyelid a millimeter at a time.

The room spins.

“Oh, come on!” I grip the vanity edge.

Two little blue lines stare up at me, and I think I’m going to be sick again.

My hands shake as I toss the test, box, and instructions into the trash, tying up the bag. I gnaw my lip as I go downstairs and dump the bag into the bin outside. I need something to take the edge off. To keep me from going crazy. And I know exactly what’s going to help. I can’t drink. I can’t sneak a cigarette. But I can do the next best thing.

I grab my purse from inside and tell Dario that we need to go out again. And as we drive, I let my mind race over what my life has turned into—something I have absolutely no control over.

I let out a shaky breath. The good thing about New York is that there’s always a store with late hours. This outlet mall is no different, and people are still milling about. I slip into the crowd of evening shoppers, Dario and another one of Saint’s men tailing me.

I’m like a junkie in need of a fix. I watch as people move in and out of the stores with their purchases. Off the bat, I know exactly which stores will make good marks. The security is slow here, too busy trying to stay awake or looking at their cells.

It’s like riding a bike. I lick my lips and slip into a store after telling the guys to wait outside. This place mostly sells women’s clothing, but I head toward the small area off to one side. It has a sign with building block icons and the word ‘Baby’ splayed across it, making my heart rate triple.

But I’m just here to browse.

I’m just here to get that adrenaline rush.

I’m not going to steal anything—because I’ve stopped that.

I start browsing, eyeing the cameras and reflective mirror in the corner. A lot of stuff has no security tags, which would make it easier if I was going to steal something. *But I’m not going to steal.*

My fingers brush the soft onesies in pastel colors. They’re cute. Little giraffes, bears, and elephants decorate a lot of them. My hand skims past

them. I stop when there's a onesie with chess pieces and puzzle pieces decorating it.

Should I buy it?

Probably...

But I'm not buying it.

I dart a look over each shoulder before picking up the onesie. Then I turn toward the entrance like I'm looking at the other racks. My fingers smoothly slide the outfit from its hangers, I slip the onesie into my spacious purse, and the hanger is discarded by hooking it onto a messy sales rack.

My body is thrumming to life as I move out of the store.

I keep an eye on the security as I make my way down to the fancy boutiques, but they don't even pay me any mind. Easy. *And I feel alive.*

I know what I'm doing is completely wrong. But the only thing I can think is that the anxiety bubbling and boiling over in my stomach has settled. And for the first time since I woke up today, I feel like myself.

Well, myself *plus one*.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

EMERALD

I've come to the bridal boutique with Milena, Giulietta, Jaspar, Jacquetta, Nicki, and Anni Marchiano.

Anni is Christian's sister, and she is visiting from Chicago where she now lives after her marriage to Lorenzo Marchiano. But since Anni is in town, I invited her here today because I've always got on well with her.

Just before we're due to start, Fidella—Jacquetta's mom—rushes in. And I shoot her a smile, really glad that she managed to make it today. Fidella has also brought Ma Veneti along with her. Ma Veneti is Fidella, Anni, and Christian's mother, as well as being Jacquetta's grandmother. Ma Veneti totters into the boutique like she owns the place, wearing six-inch stilettos and a leopard-print fur jacket. She must be around seventy, but as usual, her hair is dyed an unnatural shade of bright auburn, and she's wearing huge hoop earrings.

The boutique has crystal chandeliers and an expensive scent that drifts through the air. And everywhere I look, I can see racks of sophisticated and elegant gowns, their silk, satin, lace, taffeta, and tulle fabrics illuminated under the bright lights. As we're sitting on the couches and waiting for our bridal consultant to finish her previous appointment, an assistant comes over to us, carrying a tray with a bottle of champagne and several filled flutes. "Can I offer you ladies a glass of bubbles?" she asks in a singsong voice, holding out a flute to Ma Veneti.

Ma Veneti's nostrils flare as she scowls at her.

"Er, is there something else you would prefer," the assistant asks, practically wilting under the death stare she's currently receiving.

Ma Veneti can only manage a fierce growl as she bares her teeth, and the assistant looks like she's about to run away screaming.

"Just give my mother the whole bottle," Anni sighs.

"Um...okay...whatever she needs," the assistant gulps, glancing uneasily at us and our bodyguards before holding out the bottle to her.

Ma Veneti snatches it from her with a gleeful cackle. "Let the party begin!" she shrieks.

Fidella is about to say something, but the consultant arrives, so the dress appointment gets started. I try on several dresses before finding one which is just perfect. Everyone coos over my dress and tells me how beautiful I look. And although I'm trying to enjoy it, all I can think about is the baby.

Saint is picking up the kids and me after this, so I text him to let him know that I've nearly finished and that he can pick me up soon.

"This brings back memories," Ma Veneti sighs. "I wish I was getting married again." Then her eyes light up as an idea pops into her head. "I think I should be allowed to get a dress too!"

"Ma," Fidella sighs. "You don't need another dress. And Christian says you really need to rein in your spending."

Ma narrows her eyes at her and then bursts into tears. "But I w-w-want one!" She's sobbing now—extremely loudly.

"Oh God, we shouldn't have let her have all that alcohol," Fidella mutters to Anni.

"As if we could have stopped her," Anni replies with a grin. "You know there's three things which Ma loves and won't let anyone take away from her: alcohol, guns, and her gambling."

Jacquetta merely giggles at her grandmother's antics because she's more than used to her acting in this way. I don't know if it's because Ma Veneti belongs to the ruling family of the Imperiosi, but she's always been extremely demanding...and slightly crazy. When Anni married Lorenzo Marchiano so that the Imperiosi could make an alliance with his family, Ma Veneti was instrumental in nearly messing up the whole marriage due to her outrageous behavior which drove Lorenzo up the wall. Anni was already a lot for Lorenzo to handle, but the added interference of her ma was almost too much for him to bear.

Realizing that Fidella isn't being swayed by her tears, Ma Veneti ups her game and starts wailing at the top of her voice. "You're being so m-m-mean, Fidella!"

Fidella looks horrified at the scene her mother is causing, while Anni stifles a laugh behind her hand. The assistant looks at us in alarm. The bridal boutique is supposed to be a place of joy where dreams come true—not somewhere where dramatic scenes of family disharmony unfold.

"Okay, Ma!" Fidella hisses as she reluctantly gives in. "You can have one dress, *but you have to stop the hysterics.*"

And with that, Ma Veneti stops crying—instantaneously. And she snatches up her champagne flute. "I'll need another bottle," she announces with a mischievous gleam in her eye. And her change in mood is a bit too quick if you ask me, but then I get the feeling that this woman knows exactly how to get whatever she wants. And Anni just grins as she shakes her head because she knows that her ma is never going to change.

Then dresses are brought out for Ma Veneti, and she's enjoying trying them on and being the center of attention.

"Which one do you think you want?" Anni asks her mother.

She frowns. "None of these are quite right..."

"Can we bring you out some dresses in a different style to try on, Madam?"

Ma Veneti nods manically "Yes, that's what I need. A different style—bring out the slutty dresses!"

"Ma!" Anni rolls her eyes, while the assistant's jaw drops. But Anni gives the assistant a nod, knowing that she won't be going home until her ma gets exactly what she wants.

"This reminds me of my wedding day—and also of my wedding night. Oh, how your father loved having a virgin in his bed!"

"Ma, for goodness sake, keep your voice down!" Fidella says in a loud whisper. Because people aren't even pretending not to eavesdrop—they're outright gawking with their mouths wide open.

She looks through the new selection of dresses, picks one, and dashes off to get changed into it.

Before long, there's a rustle of fabric behind me, followed by gasps.

I turn.

And I blink several times.

Because Ma Veneti emerges from a fitting room wearing a barely-there, sequin-covered mini dress with a plunging neckline and cutouts at the waist. It's tight. *Like, vacuum-sealed tight.* "What do you think?" she says, striking a pose.

Anni coughs to cover a giggle. Fidella looks horrified. And Jacquetta is turning red in the face as she tries to hold in her laughter. The consultant freezes mid-step, trying to smile but failing miserably. Fidella tries to keep her voice calm. "Ma, don't you think that's...a bit bold?"

She waves a dismissive hand in the air. "Oh please, I've still got it. Why should the bride get all the attention?" She twirls around again and again, the hem of the dress riding dangerously high. "This screams confidence, don't you think?"

It screams something, but I don't say it, and Jacquetta and I collapse into a fit of giggles, no longer able to hold it back.

The consultant attempts diplomacy. "That style is from our *bachelorette* collection, actually..."

But Ma Veneti doesn't care. She disappears back into the fitting room, only to emerge a minute later in another dress. I look on as she struts across the floor to us. This dress is sheer, with strategically placed feathers that leave little to the imagination.

Jacquetta drops her phone. Anni chokes on her champagne. And Fidella goes wide-eyed like she's just seen a ghost—or witnessed a crime. "No, Ma, you're not buying that," Fidella croaks.

She sighs dramatically. "You young people are so uptight. When I got married, we didn't wear those meringue-shaped things. We showed off!"

"You were nineteen then," Anni reminds her mother with a grin.

She shrugs. "Age is just a number. Besides, who says older women can't be sexy?"

Then I realize that the boutique has gone completely silent. A well-dressed family in the corner exchange awkward glances. The consultant offers her most professional smile and holds out a full-length taffeta gown which she suggests would suit perfectly.

But Ma Veneti snorts and tosses it aside. She stands in front of the mirror and fluffs her hair. "Oh please, if you've got it, flaunt it. I'm just trying to find something fun to wear. I want to stand out!"

"Oh, you'll definitely stand out, Ma," Anni chuckles.

Undeterred, Ma Veneti disappears and reemerges in a white latex number that squeaks when she walks and pushes her boobs up and out.

Fidella looks like she might faint. And a little girl across the boutique asks her mom, “Is that lady in the circus?”

Saint arrives to collect me just as Ma Veneti emerges in the latest dress, singing Madonna’s ‘*Like A Virgin*’ at the top of her voice. “*Like a virgin, touched for the very first time,*” she sings out-of-tune as she skips along. “How I wish I could have my cherry popped all over again!”

Saint’s eyes are as wide as saucers, but she carries on singing and prancing around the room before flinging herself onto a couch and draping herself over it in what she hopes is a sultry pose.

I say goodbye to everyone and give them all a hug. “Thanks so much for coming today and helping me choose,” I say to Anni. “Sorry I have to dash off.”

“Wish I could escape this as well,” Anni murmurs with an exasperated grin as she hugs me back. “I can’t wait for your wedding, Emerald. You’re going to look absolutely stunning in that dress.”

And with a final wave at everyone, I head for the exit with Saint and the kids at my side.

“What was that all about?” Saint asks as I quickly lead him away. “And I wonder if Christian knows that his ma is completely out of control.”

I quirk an eyebrow. “Do you really want me to explain?”

“Probably not,” he mutters as he holds open the car door for me.

And as I slide into the car, my mind wanders again to the baby inside of me. And I know I have to tell Saint very soon...

* * *

The next day, with the kids all at school, the table is quiet as Saint and I sit there and drink coffee. My hand unconsciously slips into my pocket and fingers the chessboard keychain Saint gave me.

It’d been hard getting Milena out of bed this morning—she was out late at her friend’s house last night again as she said they had a paper they needed to study for—but now the kids are all where they need to be, I’m taking twenty minutes to relax.

Saint's fingers drift up and down my arm, and I try my best not to look nervous. Not to look like I'm hiding things. His touch comes with an onslaught of emotions and feelings. It still makes my skin tingle and light up, but it also comes with something else.

"Emerald?"

"Hmm?"

My heart races. Has he found out? Am I that bad at hiding it? I'd vanished yesterday to see a doctor to confirm that I was, in fact, pregnant. And yup, it was definitely real. Even the shot has a small failure rate.

I know I have to tell him today.

But I'm struggling to find the words.

I take a deep breath. "Saint..."

But before I can say any more, he drops his phone in front of my face, and I blink. "I..."

I say no more as I stare at the conversation on the screen.

"What is that?" I manage to get out finally.

"It's a conversation about one of the gun-runners we have," Saint says. "He said he couldn't make the run, so he got someone to fill in for him. *Milena.*"

"The hell he has!" I snap.

Saint shakes his head. He's just as shocked as I am. "It's happening right now. It's too late to stop it. For fuck's sake."

"She's supposed to be at school." I pinch the bridge of my nose. *She's skipping school to be a runner?* Of all the dumb stunts to pull. I feel like crying.

Saint gets an urgent call and has to leave for the casino, saying as he leaves that we need to talk about Milena, but it'll have to wait until later. I'm left sitting in shock in the kitchen. How has everything gotten so completely messed up?

* * *

Later, when she finally gets home, I storm through the house and meet her on the stairs. "*Milena.*"

"Emerald. I can't talk. I'm going out with friends."

"No, you're not."

“No?”

“You heard me, no.”

She laughs. “Funny.”

“I’m serious,” I say, trying to keep calm.

“What? Why?”

“I heard some real interesting news.” My hand is on my hip. “Someone seems to be under the impression that you’re running for the Imperiosi.”

“So, what’s the big deal?” She shrugs, not even denying it.

“The big deal?” I scoff. “It’s illegal. And you’re skipping class. And I checked with your dance coach, and she says you’ve missed dance practice every day this week. Is that a big enough deal for you?”

“You’re checking up on me now? Jesus. You’re making this a lot bigger than it needs to be. It’s fine.”

How can she sound so blasé about it all? “No, it’s not.”

“I said it’s fine, Em. Why are you being so lame about this?”

“*Lame?* Milena this is your future you’re talking about. School is important. Not going to prison is important!”

“Why do I even have to go to this dumb school in the first place? All my friends are at my old school. And my new friends do this kind of thing all the time.”

I feel bad that the kids had to change schools after moving into the apartment with me, but I can’t believe I’m actually having to argue about this with my sister. “So, you just do whatever everyone else does? You don’t think for yourself? And you can’t skip class! You need to graduate high school, Milena, and not end up in prison—”

“It’s a few classes. I’m still doing just fine in school.”

“Running isn’t happening anymore,” I grit out, crossing my arms over my chest. “*That’s done and over.*”

She glares at me. “Why?”

“Because it’s dangerous!”

“You did it!”

“*What?* Dammit, Milena. What I did isn’t important.”

“Yeah, it is. So, you can do it, Em, but I can’t?”

“When I did it, the circumstances were wildly different. If I hadn’t done it, we’d have been homeless. What I did was for us all.”

“We wouldn’t have been homeless,” she snaps back. “You would have bounced to the next rich guy, and he would’ve bailed us out of the hole we

were in.”

I blink. “*Excuse me?*” I try to ignore the sharp sting of her basically calling me a gold digger. “I ran those guns because that was the only way we wouldn’t lose our home. What I did and what you’re doing are two very different things. You’re done with running guns. We don’t need the money, and you don’t need to get caught!”

She rolls her eyes and stomps up the stairs.

“Milena! I haven’t finished!”

But her door slams, and I’m left to slump down on the last stair. How the hell did this all happen? And *when* did it all happen? I know I’ve been distracted lately with all the Calcedonio fallout, but how has everything gone so wrong? What am I going to do? My hands ball into fists as the tears trickle down from my eyes.

I thought she was doing okay, but I know I’ve taken my eye off the ball. Who the heck are the kids she’s hanging out with who are doing stuff like this? I thought I knew all her friends, and they’re not the sort to get mixed up in stuff like running. Milena must have fallen in with a different crowd—and they sound like a bad sort.

I know she’s been through a lot with all the stuff that went on with my mom and her long line of loser boyfriends, having to move home to the new apartment and then here, but she seemed to be handling it okay. Maybe I’ve relied on her too much? Maybe I shouldn’t ask her to watch the younger kids as much or let her know so much about our problems? I’ve tried to shield my siblings from most of our difficulties, but Milena’s a smart kid and often picks up on stuff.

She didn’t mean any of what she said, right? I tell myself that she’s just being a teenager. I look up at the ceiling, trying to will myself to calm down. I will not let her words affect me. Even though it’s clear that’s a losing battle.

If my own sister thinks the same as everyone else seems to think, that I’m a grasping gold digger, what freaking hope do I have?

Unconsciously, my hand rubs against the flat of my stomach. What business do I have in bringing another life into the world? I close my eyes as I hang my head in my hands. How did it all get so screwed up? How did I mess up this bad?

The foyer is dark by the time I realize I haven’t moved in God knows how long.

I'm no better when Saint walks in for the night. I'm at the chess table, looking out over the yard. Milena left a while ago despite a round two and me telling her no—it ended about as well as the first round of arguing.

We start playing a game of chess, and Saint asks about Milena.

"Milena and I got into the running thing earlier." And I give him a short version of our argument. I know I still have to tell him about the baby. And I want to ask him what he thinks. Does he think I can do this? Does he think I'm cut out to be a mom? But the words won't come out—because I just can't give any headspace to the pregnancy right now, not while my mind's still scrambling with the revelation of what Milena's been up to and the trouble she's getting herself into.

Saint's phone beeps, and he gets it out to see a message from Christian. "I've got to go back out."

"Now?"

"Yeah. We can talk more about Milena later. You going to be okay here alone?"

"I'll probably call it an early night. I'm worn out."

He stands without another word. And kissing my forehead, he vanishes down the hall. I wait until the door shuts with a soft slam.

This is all messed up. All wrong.

Sighing, I flop onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Tears sting my eyes and burn the back of my throat, but I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't want to cry anymore. My phone buzzes on the end table, and with a resigned sigh, I grab it.

Thank God for best friends. A small smile pulls my lips up as Jacquetta's gif reply lights my screen in our chat. It's just what I needed. A silly cat dancing. I don't even think about it before I hit the call button.

"Who are we killing?" she asks.

"What?" I laugh, a nervous lilt to it.

"I was joking!" Jacquetta giggles.

I relax into the bed and let out an exhale. "Sorry. I'm just having a bad night."

"Uh-oh. What'd Saint do? I'll kick his ass. Better yet, we'll get Christian to do it, so that we can plead plausible deniability."

I snort out a laugh. "As nice as that sounds, it's actually...a lot of things."

“Oh no, this is one of those serious conversations. Hold on.” I hear shuffling before her voice fills my ear again. “Okay. All set. Let’s hear it.”

I exhale, eyes closing. “Okay. Well, Milena and I got into it. Bad. Like really bad.”

“Over?”

“She’s running for the Imperiosi and skipping school to do it.”

“Christ...”

“Yeah. I confronted her, and well, she was Milena about it. But it wasn’t really the argument, I guess. It’s just...” I can hear my voice waiver, and I clear my throat, trying to keep my throat from clogging with tears even as my vision blurs. “I’m pregnant.” My voice waivers again, but I don’t stop. I need to get this out. To get it off my chest. “And Milena said some stuff. Some things that I think might be true. I just don’t know anymore.” A strained sound leaves me. “I mean, does Saint even love me? I know he said I’m the only woman for him and proposed to me, but does he *actually love me*? Because he hasn’t said it out aloud. And I’ve been ignoring it up until now, but I can’t any longer, not when a baby’s in the picture. I know there’s things he thinks he can’t give me. And I thought I was okay with that. I thought it didn’t matter because I was in love with him and what he was giving me was enough for me. But was I wrong? Do I need those things? *Do I need his love?*”

“Oh boy. Okay,” Jacquetta soothes. “One thing at a time. You’re pregnant.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re like a hundred percent sure?”

“Uh-huh. Officially confirmed.”

“Wow. Okay. And how do you feel about the news? Wait, sorry, stupid question given you’re literally crying.”

I laugh softly, the sound thick with tears. “Honestly, I want this baby, but I’m scared, Jacquetta. I’m really scared. Am I even capable of raising a kid or being a mom? I mean, just look at Milena. She’s doing illegal stuff and yelling at me and just about calling me a gold digger. How would I be any better with a baby?”

“First off, you are not doing a bad job with your siblings, Em. Milena is a teenager. Moody and temperamental are normal, remember?” She exhales, and I can picture her flicking her hair off her face. “You’re doing a lot right now. You’ve done a lot for your siblings, more than any older sister

should have to do. So, stop beating yourself up, okay? You rock, Em. And you love those kids like they're your own."

I want to believe that. I want to say I agree and that everything is fine now. But it's not. What Milena said, that others have said so many times in the past, keeps circling in my head again and again. Dragging me down further and further until I'm so far past rock bottom it's not even funny.

"How did Saint take the news?"

"He doesn't know yet." I wrap my arms around my knees as the phone rests between my shoulder and cheek. "I don't know how I'd even tell him. We didn't really... I mean, it's never come up. Being with me means he's had to take on my siblings as well as me, but a baby? I don't know if he's the type to even want a kid."

She's quiet for a long moment.

"That's not the only thing, Jacquetta. I shoplifted again..."

"But I thought you were going to that help group?"

"I am. I couldn't help myself. And I'm lecturing Milena about doing illegal stuff when I'm just as bad with the stealing. I just needed something to feel like me again. But afterward, I just felt so ashamed." The way my voice breaks, cracks, and splinters down the middle makes me feel so weak. I'm so tired of crying. So tired of being not enough for everyone...

There's a shout in the background and someone calling for Jacquetta. "Are you going to be okay, Em?"

"Me?" I give another painful laugh. "I'm fine. Really. You've got stuff to do now."

"Emerald..."

I want to lie to her, to tell her that I can handle this like I've handled everything, but the words won't come out.

"I'll check in with you later tonight, okay? We're not done, Em, and if you need me, I'm a text away. And I've got cat gifs galore."

I snort before swiping my eyes with the back of my sleeve. "Thanks, Jacquetta," I whisper.

"I love you, Em."

"Love you too, Jac."

The line disconnects, and I'm left sitting in the dark room. I bury my head in my knees and swallow down the sob that threatens to leave me as I wonder what I'm going to do now.

I look around myself.

And I know that I don't belong here in this mansion.
Or among the people in the Imperiosi.
Or with Saint Veneti...

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

S AINT

I reach for my pack of cigarettes. Just one quick hit, and then I'll go down the aisle.

I waste no time tapping out a smoke from the pack and lighting it.

Is it a sin to smoke inside a church? I briefly wonder but push the thought aside. If that's the cardinal sin I commit that topples the scale, the world has bigger problems.

The smoke billows from my lips and out the open stained-glass window into the chilly air. What should bring a sense of calmness, a semblance of relaxation, does nothing but give me time to think.

Fuck this.

I snuff the cigarette out and stalk to the front of the church. Luxurious white floral arrangements decorate the aisle, all the way to where the priest waits. The decorations are elegant and refined yet suffocating all at once.

Guests are filing in, out of the biting cold that blew in over last week. Seeing all these people makes it all the more real. I adjust the cufflinks on my suit jacket for the fifteenth time since putting them on. I should be ecstatic to be here. Finally, I'm here. This is what I wanted, and yet...

My molars grind into one another before I let out a huff of air through my nose. I try to shrug it off. It doesn't matter. I've got the girl. Finally, Emerald's going to be mine. That alone should make the tension in my shoulders ease. But I just can't shake the feeling brewing in my gut.

Something feels wrong—like everything has since Ronnie’s passing. Off kilter and out of control. *And I hate it.*

I hate not being able to read Emerald.

The past two or three weeks have had a tension I can’t cut through no matter how hard I try. I know that Em’s had the stress of the wedding preparations and even more stress with the Milena issue. I clench and unclench my jaw. This isn’t how it was supposed to go.

Once the vows are done, once I really have her, I’ll tell her everything. Really tell her. Really try to open up with my emotions. Maybe that’ll fix this tension between us.

“You ready?” Christian’s voice breaks my thoughts. He’s stood beside me on a day I never saw happening to me. I’m getting married—me, a man who’s cold, emotionless, ruthless. But a man who wants to melt for this one woman.

“Yeah.”

My gaze catches sight of the Marchiano family trooping into the church. “For fuck’s sake, who invited them?”

“I did, of course,” Christian says. “I mean, we are supposed to be in an alliance with them. Plus, I’m now related to them given that my sister, Anni, married into their family.”

I see Anni on the arm of Lorenzo Marchiano, and her fluffy white cat is held to her chest with her free hand. I’m pretty sure none of the wedding invitations said that pets were allowed, but Anni is cat-obsessed and inseparable from that animal.

The Marchianos reach where we’re standing, and as they do so, Anni’s cat jumps down from her arms and leaps across the aisle, chasing God knows what and nearly tripping up Lorenzo.

“For fuck’s sake!” Lorenzo says with a scowl at the creature.

“I see you still haven’t managed to get rid of Anni’s floofball,” Christian says with a chuckle.

“Having pets,” Lorenzo says darkly, “is like the Mafia. Once you’re in, there’s no getting fucking out.”

How someone as upbeat and positive as Anni puts up with a grump like Lorenzo is beyond me. But they seem happy—well, at least when Lorenzo isn’t complaining about her cat. Although Anni didn’t have much choice except to have an arranged marriage to Lorenzo after that stunt she pulled. It was hardly the best way to get on the radar of your future husband. And I

doubt Anni ever imagined she'd be marrying a single dad with two preschoolers. But they seem to have made the marriage work after the extremely rocky start. And from what I've heard, Anni's an absolutely amazing mom to Lorenzo's kids from his first marriage.

I can't help noticing a number of fathers tighten their grips on their daughters as they catch sight of the Capo, Marco Marchiano—no doubt due to his reputation for kidnapping unmarried girls.

Lorenzo and Marco offer me their congratulations. "I hope this isn't some girl that Anni found for you," Marco mutters.

"Excuse me?" I clip.

Marco grimaces. "I still remember the time Anni made an online dating profile for me without my knowledge or permission."

"Marco, you know I've apologized a million times already for what my wife did," Lorenzo huffs. "You know Anni is difficult to control at times." He throws a glance over his shoulder as Anni chases her cat across the church as it causes complete mayhem among the guests. "Anyway, you're married to Juliana now, so you didn't have to resort to any of those girls Anni found for you."

Marco snorts. "As if I would have looked twice at any of those girls. With all that stupid shit Anni made up for my online profile, anyone I matched with was bound to be completely crazy."

"You know she meant well," Lorenzo says in defense of his wife.

"Er, why on earth has the cat got a large pink bow tied around its neck," I find myself asking.

"Don't ask," Christian says. "Anni might be my sister, and I love her dearly, but she has slightly eccentric ideas at times."

Ma Veneti comes stomping up to us at that moment and jabs a finger into Lorenzo's chest. "Who said that you could bring the furball here with you?" she shrieks from right next to me.

I don't know why Christian's ma insists on shouting every time she speaks, and I'm tempted to stick my fingers in my ears just to block her piercing tones.

"Look, Ma," Lorenzo grits out, fast losing his patience with his mother-in-law. "I never wanted the cat in the first place. I only ever agreed to take your daughter, and no one ever said anything about me having to take the cat as well."

I watch as Camillo Marchiano walks to his seat, holding the hand of his wife, Rosa, and looking adoringly into her eyes. Their son, Ethan, is beside them. No one would be able to tell that Ethan isn't Camillo's birth son. And when I see how Camillo took on a single mom and her son, and I see how close they are and their obvious love, I know that's what I want it to be like between me and Emerald and her siblings. Emerald comes with a ready-made family, and I'm totally fine with that. Actually, more than fine. Because I love the kids now just as much as I love Em.

After Camillo has got his family seated, he strides up and growls at his oldest brother, Marco. "Rosa made those for me, asshole!"

"What are you talking about now?" Marco drawls in a dismissive tone.

"You know what I'm talking about," Camillo grits out. "She made the pies *for me*."

"Look, I didn't touch the apple pie," Marco blusters, shifting uneasily from one foot to another.

Camillo glares at him. "You ate the peach pie. Plus, a slice from the lemon pie. Those ones were mine as well—they're *all* mine, and you know that."

"Aw, come on, Camillo, you gotta learn to share—"

"Just keep your filthy paws off my wife's baked treats, or you'll be fucking sorry," Camillo says with a scary scowl.

I suppress a grin because everyone knows that Camillo's wife is the best cook in that family, and the brothers often fight over the cakes and pies she bakes. Camillo stomps back to his seat.

And I hear Rosa speak to him. "Don't worry, I'll bake some more pies and cupcakes just for you tomorrow." Then she smiles and lowers her voice. "And I've got another special treat for you later tonight..."

Camillo is the enforcer for the Marchianos, and he has a fearsome and brutal reputation, but as soon as he looks at his wife, he completely softens. He's a totally different man when he's with her, and he doesn't care who sees it. She was in desperate need of protection from her extremely dangerous ex, and Camillo never once let her down. They have the sort of marriage I aspire to, and I only hope that I can prove myself worthy of Emerald.

Christian checks a message on his phone. "Leoluca just texted to say Emerald's nearly here."

"Good." I give a satisfied smile.

“All okay?” I ask Jasper where he sits on the front pew in his small suit, coloring in some superhero coloring book.

He gives me a scrutinizing look before just glaring at me.

Great. He’s in a bad mood after I forgot to get Lucky Charms from the store. All the last-minute wedding stuff made it slip my mind, but he seems to be convinced that I must be hiding the cereal and keeping it all for myself. Sometimes, I don’t understand where this six-year-old kid gets his ideas from. Despite the progress we’ve made over the past few months, I swear things with this kid are always two steps forward and one step back.

What with Jasper’s grumpiness plus Milena’s continued iciness toward me and Emerald after we grounded her, it’s a wonder that we even managed to get them to the church today. Only Giulietta seemed excited about coming today, although I did have to suggest to her that her teddy bears would probably prefer to have a Kool-Aid tea party at home instead of all coming to the wedding reception after she got them dressed up in ballerina tutus she’d outgrown.

A nagging feeling in the back of my head, the one that’s telling me something is wrong, is blaring in my gut now. The alarm bells are ringing on full blast. I’ve missed something important, and I don’t know what.

“You good?” Christian asks.

“Fine.” I remark, tugging on the sleeve of my suit jacket once more.

“Yeah, you look really thrilled to be here.”

“Shouldn’t you be, I don’t know, somewhere else?” I ask, brow arched.

“Like greeting the underbosses or something?”

“Nah. I’d much rather be here, bugging you. You smell like smoke.”

“I wonder why.”

“Real romantic.”

“If that’s all you have to offer, Christian, your seat’s waiting.”

“This is more entertaining.”

“Of course it is.” I roll my eyes at him before sighing. “Something’s off.”

“You got cold feet?” he asks.

My eyes snap up to him, and I glare. “No. But it feels...off.”

“I think those are called pre-wedding jitters. Your robotic heart is probably confused.”

I scowl at him. “Okay, asshole. Thanks for the input. But I don’t mean that.”

“You think Carmine’s going to retaliate here?”

“Not sure... Either way, everyone should be on high alert just in case.”

Christian nods as I get in place in front of the altar. I don’t miss the way people look at me—all the Imperiosi families that had to be invited to keep up good relations.

Christian takes his seat in the front pew as I let out a breath. My eyes track the entrance, the guards posted periodically in the alcoves, and the men who are carrying beneath their suit jackets. Carmine would be fucking stupid to try interfering with this. I know I’m preparing for something that probably won’t happen, but that’s who I am. Ten steps ahead. Always thinking of the next move.

My gaze moves to the aisle where Giulietta stands in her pale pink dress—the very dress she picked out weeks ago and hasn’t stopped talking about the entire time. Behind her stands Milena, Jacquetta, and Nicki, their dresses in a coordinating shade.

Giulietta waves to me enthusiastically and twirls, showing off her dress. My lip twitches. At least someone seems excited about the ceremony.

The music starts, and the guests rise, and I watch Giulietta sprinkle petals on the ground before moving to sit next to Jaspar in the pew. Next, Milena, Jacquetta, and Nicki come walking down the aisle. Then the music changes, and my gaze attaches to the doorway.

Emerald steps out.

And I take her in. The white dress that hugs her like a glove. The inky curls of her hair that spill down her back from some intricate style that Jacquetta no doubt helped with. The way her green eyes are lined in some shimmery bronze color. It knocks the air from my lungs.

Our eyes lock, and something stabs at my chest. I told her once, and I’ll tell her over and over again, she’s mine. Today’s just making it official.

It takes her far too long to approach the altar, hand off her bouquet to Milena, and face me.

I take her hands, thumb brushing over her knuckles in some attempt to reach her. To soothe that look in her face. Once this is over, I’ll come clean. I’ll do what I haven’t been able to do since I arrived in New York. Be honest with her—fully honest about my emotions.

Then I won’t have to worry about losing her over it. Because she’ll know the truth.

I squeeze her hand softly, trying to find that spark in her eyes that makes my chest hurt every time I catch her looking at me with it. That look that makes me feel like I can be a better man. Makes me want to be—for her.

I didn't lie when I told her I wanted this for real, when I worshiped her as she deserved, when I claimed her as my own in every way I could. And yet, it all feels so far away from now. A distant memory that's shattered into a million pieces.

The priest drones on and on about how holy this union is and how beautiful marriage can be, but Emerald's expression remains guarded. Not a frown, but she's not smiling either...

Is something wrong? My eyes dart around the place as the alarm bells ring too loud to be ignored.

"Valentino Veneti and Emerald Fiorelli, have you come to enter into marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly?"

The words snap me back to the ceremony at hand, and I look to the weathered faced of the priest. "I have."

Emerald inhales sharply. "I have."

My eyes slide back to her, my brow furrowing just slightly as the priest continues with his questions about love and marriage and children and a bunch of shit I don't care about but agree to anyway. My eyes are glued to Emerald's.

"Since it is your intention to enter the covenant of holy matrimony, join your right hands and declare your consent before God and his church."

I swallow as my grip on Emerald's hand tightens. I lock eyes on her, trying to pour some kind of emotion into my gaze, some truth into the words as they spill past my lips. "I, Valentino Veneti, take Emerald Fiorelli to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part."

I feel her hand tremble in my own.

Her eyes dart past me.

"Emerald...?" The priest prompts her for her vows.

My hand tightens. My eyes narrow slightly. And my heart pounds in my chest.

But before she can say anything, a voice pipes up. "You can't marry him, Emerald!"

I spin around.

A shared gasp reverberates around the church.

And my eyes dart around.

Trying to find the offender.

But I already recognize the voice...

And I can't help the groan that escapes me.

"He's nothing but a freaking cereal thief!" the voice continues.

And Jaspar's glaring at me, his tiny fists crossed over his small chest.

Jesus fucking Christ. What the hell has gotten into the kid? And why the hell did I ever think it was a good idea to take a box of Lucky Charms from a six-year-old kid in the first place?

I start to speak. "Look, Jaspar, come on—"

But someone else says something, the mocking voice echoing in the silence of the large church. "She's just a whore and a gold digger. I don't know why anyone would want to marry a slut like her." And as a few people nod in agreement, I realize that it's Ria Gioberti speaking. And Emerald's face falls, embarrassment and humiliation flushing her cheeks as she hears Ria's cruel comments.

But before I can say anything else, I see a whirl of white.

And Emerald's taking off down the aisle.

Her dress gathered in her hands as she breaks into a sprint.

A chorus of gasps and shocked sounds fills the space.

And I'm vaguely aware of the priest talking to me. But the words don't register.

My world spins as she turns it upside down and inside out with that one goddamn action.

I run my tongue over my teeth, eyes closed. In. Out. I breathe, trying to calm the inferno trying to overtake me.

My jaw tightens. I can feel the eyes on me. I can feel the questioning stares and whispers as they pound against me. One beat of my heart, then another, and I block it all out.

"Saint?"

Someone grabs my arm, but I yank free. I don't bother turning to the call of my name as I storm down the aisle.

Ten minutes. All she had to do was wait at most ten minutes.

I drag my hand through my hair as the bitter wind slams into me. I can hear the shout of my name, but I still don't bother to stop. I'll be damned if I'm going to let her just walk out on me like that.

The door to my car slams shut as I roar the engine with a sharp flick of my wrist and a pump on the pedal. My finger hits the dial button to call Emerald, to make some kind of contact.

But nothing.

“Dammit, Emerald,” I mutter, weaving in and out of the traffic. She got a what, a five or ten-minute head start on me? At this time of day, traffic’s going to be a killer, and my fingers drum against the wheel as I glare out the window.

Of all the stunts to pull. Of all the things to goddamn do.

My teeth grind together. Do I deserve this? Maybe. I haven’t exactly given her a reason to stay. A reason to want me as I am.

My knuckles whiten on the steering wheel, and I let out a slow hiss of breath. I should have known this would come crashing down and that I’d be left scrambling to pick up the pieces, but I did it anyway. *What is it about Emerald that makes me so reckless and so...out of control?*

I can’t ever be the man she needs. No wonder she ran. Chained to an unfeeling, unemotional bastard like me is a death sentence for anyone. And I’ve been selfish and foolish enough to think she could look past it. That if I just pretended hard enough, it wouldn’t matter. *That I could have something I was never meant to have.*

A bitter humorless laugh bubbles from me as I pull up at the mansion. I don’t even bother shutting the car door as I stride up the stairs and into the house. “Emerald!”

Nothing.

“Emerald, I swear to God, get out here. Now. We need to talk!”

My chest is laboring, and I feel like a monster. I *am* a monster. That black pit of unfeeling has swallowed me whole.

I take the stairs two at a time, shoving open the bedroom door. The slam of it against the wall reverberates through the room.

Empty.

Where the hell is she? There’s no way she didn’t beat me here. “Emerald!”

No answer.

My eyes narrow on the closet and dresser. Yanking open the drawers, I scan the contents. Her clothes are still there. I do the same with the closet. Still as it should be.

Whirling on my heel, I scan the room. Nothing out of place. Nothing amiss. My jaw tightens as I storm into the hall. The fact that her things are still here doesn't mean that she hasn't run. Lord knows the woman is ready to bounce at a drop of a hat.

My nostrils flare as I pace. I can figure this out. She's smart, but not when she's rushed. I just need a clue. A single fucking piece of information to point me in the right direction. I found her that time in that shitty motel, so I know I can find her now.

It's not hurt that I feel. No, this is something else. Something deeper and thornier. Something that wraps around my heart and squeezes until the organ struggles to even beat.

"Fuck, Em," I mutter, leaning against the banister, trying to remain composed.

I stride down the hall toward the guest room. I try the door and stop, pounding my fist against it. "Open the goddamn door, Emerald!"

There's no response, and not a single sound comes from the room. Fucking perfect. I march back to the master and grab the spare key, using it to unlock the door to the guest room.

Throwing the door open, I'm standing in an empty room. She's not here. The bed is made, and her laptop sits on the dresser. And although Emerald has been spending a lot of time in here lately, there's hardly anything that gives me any clue of where she is now.

My eyes narrow. "Where the hell did you go?" I mutter, scanning the room once more. The closet door protests as I yank it open, nearly ripping it from its track in the process. Her spare clothing lines the hangers. More dress boxes and various shopping bags are scattered on the floor. I dig through them, throwing them behind me onto the bed after I rifle through them, looking for a clue. For something. *For anything.*

"Fuck!" My hand braces on the shelf in the closet, and I lean my head against it.

Leave it to Emerald to make me lose control like this. To feel like this.

I shove from the closet and turn to the mess I've made and freeze.

My eyes narrow as I look at the heaps of stuff I tossed onto the bed.

There among some dresses is a...

Onesie.

Not an old one—it doesn't belong to Jaspar or Giulietta from when they were younger. No, this one is brand new.

I slump onto the edge of the bed, my hand slowly scooping up the soft material.

Fuck. Me.

The room spins. My chest heaves. And I can hear my breathing turn ragged.

My fist curls around the tiny pastel outfit, my eyes glued to the small item in my hands, my mind galloping at a mile a minute.

Is this why she ran?

Why the hell didn't she tell me?

But the moment I ask that question, I already know the answer.

It's been staring at me right in the face since I watched her take off down that aisle.

It's me.

It's always been me.

Not enough.

Not emotional.

Not capable of feeling something like love.

I'd let myself believe the delusion for too long. The tension between Emerald and I these past weeks only proves it. I'm never going to be what she wants or needs. I had to manipulate her into marrying me in the first place. And just when I thought that for once, someone could find me enough, could live with the fact that I can't offer them comfort, solace, or emotional support, she turns around and runs.

My hand tightens around the fabric, wrinkling it in my grasp, my lip curling into a snarl as I stare at the baby onesie.

Veneti men don't feel.

It's a weakness.

And I've let that weakness consume me for far too long.

I drag my hand down my face. Getting to this day was supposed to be an easy plan to execute. I had my moves all figured out in advance: woo the girl, make her realize that the physical chemistry was enough to make up for my lack of emotional support, parade her around, and make it known that anyone lays a finger on her and they'll lose it.

My plan was precise.

Methodical.

Well strategized.

Just like every hit I carry out.

Just like every single game of chess I play.

And yet, Emerald, in her normal infuriating manner, has managed to throw a wrench into it all.

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CHAPTER FORTY

EMERALD

The house is dark when I tiptoe inside. I make it up the stairs and pause, listening. No movement. Not a sound.

I groan yet again as I think what a scene I caused by running out of my own wedding. I know it was extremely unfair to Saint, and I feel terrible about it. I really should have told him about the baby before the wedding. He deserved that.

A wedding day is supposed to be the happiest day of a girl's life, and the very last thing I ever expected to hear was being called a slut as I stood before the altar. And with everything else that has been going on, hearing that insult was the straw that broke the camel's back. I still can't believe that I actually ran out of there. Dear God, why does everything in my life always turn into *one big mess*?

I quickly make my way to the guest room I've been using to store my spare stuff. Flicking the light on, my heart swoops into my stomach, and sweat breaks out over the back of my neck.

Saint doesn't lift his head. Doesn't acknowledge I'm even in the room.

My pulse beats wildly in my head like a marching band. Thump. Thump. Thump.

But it's not Saint's presence that's sent a chill down my spine.

It's what he holds in his hand.

I swallow hard.

“Is this your not-so-subtle way of telling me that we’re having a baby?”

“You...weren't supposed to find out like this.”

“Were you going to tell me, Emerald?”

I blink, my eyes glued to the onesie clutched in his hand. My voice is lodged into my throat.

“Or were you just planning on leaving me at the altar and disappearing again so that you didn’t have to tell me that you’re pregnant?”

“I’m sorry, Saint,” I whisper. “You didn’t deserve to find out about the baby in this way. I know we should have had this conversation before the wedding. I really am sorry.” And I genuinely feel awful about my actions. Standing up there at that altar, staring across from him, something just snapped. Ria’s sneering words and every single whisper that’s followed me around over the years stabbed at me further and further. And I realized what a mess I’m in, having a baby with a man who doesn’t even love me...

I thought what I had with Saint could be real.

But I’ve been lying to myself.

Saint said himself that he’s not capable of what I need. He’s not built for that kind of thing—opening up, letting someone in, loving them. He’s not someone who can ever give me that. And I thought I was okay with that. I thought it didn’t matter because what he gave me was enough. *But I was wrong.*

I open and close my mouth, trying to find the right words.

His head turns to me, and I see that infuriating expression on his face. That mask of indifference that claws at my insides.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he grits out. He stands, tossing the onesie onto the bed.

“I needed time to process...”

His laugh is hard. Bitter and cold. “Why didn’t you tell me, Emerald?” he repeats, enunciating each word carefully.

“Would it have mattered?”

“And what the hell was up with Jaspar? Stopping the wedding and calling me a cereal thief like that?”

I close my eyes briefly, suddenly remembering what was far from Jaspar’s finest moment. “Oh God, now everyone’s going to think that my thieving ways have rubbed off on you, Saint,” I groan.

“I don’t care what anyone thinks,” he clips.

I shake my head. "This baby doesn't stand a chance. Not with us as parents."

He blinks at me, and for a split second, I see something flicker across his face. Not anger, not rage, not disappointment. Something like...hurt. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean, Saint. With a thieving gold digger for a mother and a lying assassin for a father, this kid is doomed to be just as messed up as we are," I wail. The words spill from me before I can stop them. Because they're true. Saint and I are both messed up in a big way, and I can't believe we're bringing a baby into this world.

"Being a kleptomaniac isn't a hereditary condition," he says dryly before his gaze softens ever so slightly. "And I keep telling you, life isn't so black and white. You have to stop thinking in such absolutes. When I look at you, all I see is how intelligent and caring you are."

I shake my head.

"Em, the baby will be strong like you, ruthless like me, and smart like both of us."

"If it's a girl, she might not be ruthless."

"If it's a girl, she can be compassionate like you."

I bite my lip to keep it from trembling. "Just look at how I've done with Milena, for Christ's sake. If that's not proof that I don't know what I'm doing, I don't know what is."

"That's why you ran?"

"No."

His eyes harden again. "Don't lie to me, Emerald."

"You said yourself that you can't offer me what I need, so why do you care if I ran or not? We both know this was just some...some mistake. Something we took too far."

He steps closer, and I step back.

"Why did you run, Emerald?"

The soft edge of his demand is laced with something I don't want to face right now, I don't want to acknowledge. "Stop pretending you care, Saint." My arms cross over my chest. "I don't belong here with you. And you don't belong with me either."

I stare at him as my chest labors. The words that have been burning inside me these last few weeks have come surging to the surface.

Saint stares at me, but I shake my head. His jaw tightens, and he just stares, his dark eyes stormy and unreadable.

For a moment, I brace myself, waiting for him to fire back.

To show some kind of emotion that'll crack all the walls between us.

To show me he can love me.

My stomach twists, and I wrap my arms around myself, barely holding in all the emotions that are fighting to burst out of me. I search for something to keep myself grounded, but I can't fight it. The sight of that tiny onesie on the bed does the opposite, sending a wave of nausea through me. I should say something. Reach out to him—do anything—to break this tension. But the longer the silence stretches between us, the smaller and smaller I feel.

"I need to get some air," I mutter. The words are hollow even to my ears, brittle and fragile as they tumble out.

I don't know if he hears me, if he registers what I say. Or if he even cares. I don't wait for his protest. I don't wait for him to say anything.

I tell myself it's for the best, that leaving now spares us both the crash and burn that awaits us down the road.

With every step down the hall, the ache in my chest grows more and more until it's a crushing weight.

I pause just a moment, and my vision blurs with tears. Maybe, I think hopelessly, he'll call me back. Ask me to stay. Tell me I'm wrong about us. About this baby. That it's all worth fighting for.

But I know Saint.

And I know he's never going to come for me.

And I know he's never going to love me.

The air around me remains resolutely silent. And biting down on my lip as it quivers, I quickly make my way down the stairs.

I swear I hear a single footstep above me, a near imperceptible creak of the wood floor.

But then...

Nothing.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

S AINT

The house is dark and quiet once more. My hand trembles at my side, and I fist it tightly to stop the shake. My eyes are glued to the door which closed with the soft click before I could work out how to stop her.

I should have stopped her.

I should jog down the steps, yank her into my arms, and tell her she's wrong.

But I don't.

Because in the blink of an eye, the world around me shifts again, and I'm that five-year-old kid again, being swallowed up by the darkness. Alone and unwanted. Laughter echoes in my head. I swallow hard against the thoughts, shoving them down as far and as deep as I can.

I step toward the door and then stop. Eyes squeezing shut, I don't move a muscle until I'm once more in control.

She needs air? What the hell does that mean?

I yank open the door and make it two more steps down the hall before reality comes crashing back onto me once more.

Pregnant.

Emerald is pregnant.

I stumble, bracing myself against the wall as the room tilts under me.

I'm going to be a father.

Her words ring in my head over and over again, joining the dark memories and doubt that suck me into some spiral of madness.

Dread and uncertainty swallow me whole. I squeeze my eyes shut and put my head in my hands. My heart is thumping like a drum in my chest, and I can't shake the feelings, the emotions, that are clawing me into the depths of hell.

She's gone.

I can feel the tremor in my hands as they drag through my hair. I suck in a deep breath through my nose. *I've done this.*

She's out there doing God knows what because I pushed her.

Because I couldn't do the one decent thing in this world. Because I couldn't tell her what she means to me.

But to do right by her, I have to be honest with her—and I don't think I'm capable of loving her how she deserves. How they *both* deserve.

My head lifts to the empty house as I cup the back of my head.

I deserve to feel like this. I know it. This feeling shredding up my insides is something I haven't felt in decades. But I deserve this.

"Fuck..." My head bows once more. Anger boils up inside me, pushing past the guilt and the remorse. It's hot and molten as it licks through my veins. How the hell didn't I notice? Why didn't she tell me? Is it so terrible to think that I could be... But I cut that thought off before it can fully form and push it from my mind.

It's dark now, and if I know Emerald, she's not coming home anytime soon. A fact that only makes that beast in my chest roar.

My eyes land on the vase of roses sent by a friend of Emerald's who couldn't make the wedding. Fucking *red roses*.

I stomp over to them, my lip curling at the corner as I stare at the delicate petals. Without a thought, I hurl the vase, flowers and all, into the door, listening to the glass shatter.

Fuck!

My hand curls at my side, muscles tense. Something tangled and twisted, akin to sorrow maybe, surges up as I stare at the shattered glass and the puddle of water.

How the hell did it get like this?

How did I fuck it up so bad in such a short amount of time?

Of all the people to make me feel like this—unstable, uncertain, and out of control—it had to be Emerald Fiorelli. She's the only goddamn person

who's managed to get this far under my skin, and she's like a beautiful thorn I can't get out.

My chest heaves, and my frustrated pants fill the space.

I hate this.

I hate how far I've let her in. How bothered I am about this—about her.

I spare a glance at the clock on the side table, and my anger comes back tenfold. Where in God's name is she going at this time of night? Is she even coming back?

And that last thought brings a dread that sucker punches me, and my anger uses it as fuel. Hotter and hotter, it burns.

This is my fault.

This is my doing.

Emerald is running away yet again, and there's not a damn thing I can do to stop her this time. No sham of a proposal to get her to be with me. No promise of being better. No pretty words. Nothing.

I inhale deeply before hissing out a breath. Again and again until the quiet calm takes over—the unnerving kind of calm that comes when I reign in my emotions...

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

EMERALD

I pour my heart out to Jacquetta, my entire body hollow and empty.

Why did I want him to come storming down those stairs, following me to tell me everything was going to be okay?

Because I fell in love with a man who can't love me back.

And I feel a fresh wave of tears in my throat as Jacquetta hands me another tissue. Milena, Jaspar, and Giulietta are downstairs, doing God knows what with Jacquetta's family and Christian, giving us time to talk.

The ruined wedding dress I showed up in hours ago is draped against a chair, mocking me.

"I..." But I can't get the words out. I shouldn't care. I shouldn't care that this is how it all came crashing down. Because deep down in the back of my mind, I knew it would. "He found out."

"Found out?"

"About the baby." I look down at where my arms are wrapped around a pillow.

She rests her chin on my shoulder. "If he's too stupid to see how amazing you are, that's on him. You deserve someone better."

I give a noncommittal hum. I just thought Saint was it.

"Is that why you ran?"

"No. I mean, maybe."

“Girl, you are the talk of all the gossips. I thought that Marjorie Martinelli was going to have a cardiac arrest.”

A small chuckle leaves me as I imagine Marjorie’s reaction. “I’m happy that I provided some entertainment.”

She sighs and leans closer to me, hugging me tight. “Are you going back?”

I shake my head. The thought of seeing him right now makes my heart clench and bile crawl up my throat.

“You can stay here if you want.”

“Thanks. I don’t want to be a bother, though.”

“Uh, excuse you? We haven’t had enough girl time. So, you’re staying.”

I nod. “Do you think I can...just be alone for a bit?”

Jacquetta nods. “Sure. I’ll go get some blankets and sneak some cookies and something else for us.”

I give her hand a small squeeze. “Thanks. Really. I don’t know what I’d be like without you here.”

“You’d be utterly lost and sad without my amazingness in your life,” she quips.

This time, my laugh is a little stronger and less filled with tears.

“I’ll go see about the food situation and check on the rugrats.”

My fingers drift over my stomach beneath the pillow I’m clutching. Everything is a mess. I let Saint pull me in with pretty words and amazing sex. I let him fool me into wanting something with him. And thinking I had it with him, I had the rug pulled out from under me.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to stem the tears.

How could I be so damn stupid?

Every time I think the tears are going to stop, that I’m done crying, something else pops into my head and makes it start all over again.

He said it was real.

I grip the pillow tighter yet. It was just another lie from Saint. I should have seen it coming.

You come after people *you love*. You fight for people you love to stay. You don’t let them walk out a door and hope they come back eventually. You tell them to sit down and talk. You do whatever you can to make things right.

A soft knock at the door draws my attention. I try to muster a smile, but I don’t quite make it as I feel another fresh sting of tears.

“Em?”

“I’ll be down in a bit,” I call out before burrowing my face into the pillow. I don’t want to talk. I don’t want to say anything else. I want this hole that’s opened up in my chest to close up and stop leaking the life out of me.

I want to go back in time and tell myself to stop before I get too far into things with Saint. That those pretty words, those soft moments, and those feelings of butterflies in my stomach are going to be my ruin.

I thought that I meant something to him. That for once, someone saw and wanted the real me: the Emerald who just wants to be loved for who she is.

But that’s a pipe dream.

I know that now.

A sob racks my body, and I feel Jacquetta come back and put her arms around me. But it only makes me cry harder.

Why am I not enough?

Why can’t I ever be enough?

I want to scream those questions to anyone who’ll listen. But, instead, I huddle into Jacquetta’s embrace.

Eventually, my heart will stop bleeding, and it’ll stop feeling like Saint’s torn me to shreds from the inside out.

And when I finish crying, I’ll figure out my next steps.

For my siblings. For the baby beneath my fingers. For myself.

I have to.

I lean into Jacquetta as she hugs me tightly, letting my eyes drift close.

I’ve survived so much.

But trying to survive Saint is ripping my heart out.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

S AINT

It's already evening. I spent all of last night and most of today trying to come up with some way to fix this.

If it's even fixable.

The house is too quiet. Too still and sucked of life that it pushes into my chest. I haven't slept since she left. Since Christian told me she was with Jacquetta and asked me about a hundred questions. All of which I ignored.

I sit in the foyer, my head slumped in my hands. Every so often, my gaze flickers between the clock and the door. She has to come home soon, right? They all do. They can't stay away any longer.

She belongs here.

The kids belong here.

Our baby belongs here.

With me.

Not in some house where I'm not. But here with me. Filling the house with sounds of laughter and conversation. *Making it feel like home.*

My hand curls into a fist.

The clock chimes, and I glare at it.

I want the house filled with warmth and happiness. I want the kids here. I want this baby. More than anything, I want Emerald.

But fixing what I broke? I don't even know how to begin putting that right, and the thought has dread swimming through me.

I *need* Emerald. It's not a want anymore. She's wormed her way so completely into my life that I can't get her out of my head if last night's fitful sleep is any indication. The smell of her shampoo lingering on the pillow haunted me, the pain in her voice running through my mind on repeat.

My heart races in my chest, and I rub at it to displace the feeling of helplessness, that uncomfortable sensation that feels like someone's wrapped barbed wire around my heart and pulled it tight.

The door creaks open, and I leap up.

Jaspar and Giulietta race into the house. The moment both of them spot me standing awkwardly, they launch at me, wrapping their arms around my legs as they giggle and talk a mile a minute about the sleepover they had. And something warm seeps through me at the thought that at least Jaspar is no longer mad at me.

My eyes slip shut as I bend down to hug them properly, relishing in the comfort that spreads from them to me. Thawing that dead thing in my chest a little more. Milena gives a brief wave before heading up the stairs and taking the kids with her.

I stand absolutely still as I stare, waiting for Emerald to walk through the door.

One beat. Then another. Then another. And fear roots deep inside me.

She's not coming.

I take a step but freeze when Emerald comes in, lugging a bag that looks to contain her wedding dress. She looks pale and exhausted. And yet, she still knocks the breath out of me.

My body moves without thinking, and I take the bag from her.

She avoids my gaze and moves past me into the house and up the stairs. I watch and let out a sigh of relief and dread, all at once.

Letting her walk out of my life isn't an option. I need to show her I can do this. I need to prove to myself that I can do it. Because losing Emerald isn't a possibility anymore.

I swallow and move up the stairs to check on the kids.

Giulietta hugs me again, and I hug her tightly back before she climbs onto her bed to play, her teddy bear family surrounding her. After a quick check-in with Milena and Jaspar, I slowly make my way down the hall. It feels like I'm wading through sludge, each step harder than the one before.

I push the door open and scan the room. I don't know if she's staying or leaving, and my heart drops like an out-of-control rollercoaster at the thought of it.

"Emerald?"

She emerges from the bathroom.

"Can we talk?"

"About what, Saint? Pretty sure we said it all already."

Taking the few steps between us, I'm standing before her. "No. We didn't." My voice cracks slightly, and I clear my throat. "Just one conversation..."

Her eyes sweep over my face before she nods. "Fine."

My chest expands slightly, and I nod to the bed before dragging a hand down the front of my face, feeling the two days' worth of stubble. "Why did you keep it a secret, Em? Why did you keep the baby a secret?"

I can't read the emotion in her eyes, but I can see the fresh sheen of tears. And the dead lump where my heart should be squeezes painfully. My hand twitches to reach out to her. Cup her cheek and tell her it's going to be fine. But I don't. Not yet.

She shrugs.

I look deep into her gaze. "I just want to understand."

"I was scared, okay?"

Her words twist like a knife. "Of me?"

"It wasn't..." She sighs. "It doesn't matter."

I want to argue, to push her to see that it does matter. She matters. But I can't find the words, so I ask something else. A safe topic, I hope. "You started shoplifting again?"

"Yes. It was that onesie. But afterward, once the adrenaline wore off, I felt absolutely terrible about it. Really bad and ashamed of myself. And I sent the cash and a written apology to the store, but I know that doesn't make up for what I did."

"You stole again because of the baby?"

"Because I needed...to feel in control."

My fingers flex and itch to reach out to her, to show her she's not alone. "Emerald." I inhale deeply. I hate this. I hate that I've caused this look on her face. This thick wall of tension between us.

My eyes flicker over her and then to the side. To the chess set. "One game."

Her brow furrows. "What?"

"A game." I nod my chin behind her to the chessboard.

"Now? You want to play chess now?"

"Please, Em. One game." I don't know if it'll help break through the tension between us or the way everything feels like it's been turned upside down, but it's worth a shot.

She sighs. "Fine. One game." She pushes to her feet and sits in the chair with a sigh.

I move across the room and drop into my usual seat.

The silence between us is tense as she starts the game. Despite that, a sense of familiarity trickles over me, calming some of the anxiety threatening to choke me. I hate how out of control of the situation I've become.

I'm watching her, not the board, as she makes yet another move. "Do you really feel that way, Em?"

She looks up at me, flicking her hair back before she looks down at the board again. "What way?"

"That you won't be an amazing mom?"

She knocks a piece over, and the wide eyes of her expression tell me she does in fact feel that way. She fixes the toppled piece and looks away. "Your turn, Saint."

I only glance at the board before looking back at her. My piece slides across, but I'm only half playing. Emerald has my attention. "You know what you said isn't true, right?"

"Yes, it is."

"No, it's not," I grit out.

She blinks. My words came out a little harsher than I intended, but I need her to understand just how amazing she is. How much she's already doing without even trying.

"Your siblings are damn lucky to have you, Emerald. Milena is a teenager. She's got a chip on her shoulder sometimes, but deep down, she knows she'd be lost without you. The other two adore you. You do it all without protest. Without complaint. Without thinking of yourself." I can see she's thinking about what I've just said, so I carry on. "And our baby is goddamn lucky to have someone as kindhearted, caring, and loving as you as their mom..."

My heart thunders in my chest—surely, this is what a heart attack feels like. Because the words I really need to say, the words that lodge in my throat, just won't come. "You're smart. Not just with this stuff." I motion to the board. "But with everything. I meant it when I told you that. There's not a damn thing in this world you can't do if you set your mind to it. Giulietta and Milena both got that trait from you."

She moves her piece silently, averting her eyes.

Again, the need to cup her cheek, to make her see what I'm saying is true, has my hand flexing around the edge of the board. "You've done so much for your siblings. I doubt there's a line you won't cross to ensure they have everything they need and more. And you'll do the same for our baby..." The words drift off for a second as I clear my throat, trying to dispel the feeling in my chest. "Your siblings are damn lucky to have you. And I'm...damn lucky to have you too."

Her eyes shine, but she grits her teeth as she pushes her piece into place.

Just fucking say it. Tell her what she means to you.

I open my mouth before letting it shut as I look down at the board. Even though I'm staring at the pieces, I'm not seeing them.

"Thank you..."

My head snaps up, and my brow furrows. "What?"

"For saying that stuff."

"It's not stuff, Emerald. It's the truth." Instead of yet another lie. I'm trying here, trying to be the man she needs me to be. If I can just break through this tension between us, then I'm halfway there. "Em, I..." But I can't get out what I need to say.

"Finish the game, Saint."

I push my piece across the board.

And she slides her rook into place. Checkmate.

She narrows her eyes at me. "You let me win?"

"No, I didn't—" The sound of my phone ringing cuts me off. "I didn't lose on purpose. That's not my style." I lost because I wasn't paying attention. Because getting her to see that she's more than I could ever hope to deserve in life was more important.

My gaze drops to my phone, and I sigh heavily. "I have to go out for an hour. I'm really sorry. They need me at the casino. It's urgent." I fucking wish I could say no, but I can tell it's non-negotiable. It's at times like this that I fucking hate being a made man. "We can talk more when I get back."

She nods.

I stand from the table, dragging a hand down my face as I shove my phone in my pocket. I cross the room in a few steps. I linger by the doorframe, my gaze not wanting to tear away from her. “We’re not over, Emerald. *Not by a long shot.*”

It takes every ounce of my loyalty to the Imperiosi to step outside the door. Someone better be fucking dying because if they aren’t, they’re about to be. And the sooner I deal with whatever shit is happening at the casino, the sooner I can get back here and fucking fix what I broke—or, at least, try to.

Because I plan to do whatever the hell it takes for Emerald Fiorelli to understand. To understand that I don’t think I can live without her now.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

EMERALD

I pack a small bag. I don't need much for the Bahamas—just a few bikinis, shorts, and tees. And I don't know why, but I make sure I take the chessboard keychain as well.

And then I get the kids ready to go. The whole time, I fight back tears. I only came back here this evening to collect the kids' bags. It was planned all along that they would spend the two weeks after the wedding at Jacquetta's while I was on honeymoon in the Bahamas. And after a whole ton of persuading, Jacquetta convinced me to go on the honeymoon by myself, telling me that I need a break to get over everything.

But I can't stop thinking about the conversation I had with Saint.

Why did I think it might be different?

He said he's trying. What does that even mean? He's trying to what?

Fix things?

Fall in love with me?

But I just can't do it. Because the things he said—being lucky to have me in his life—sliced what little was left of my heart to ribbons. *Because that's not enough for me anymore.*

I usher the kids down the hall and down the stairs. The younger two are looking forward to their mini-vacation at Jacquetta's place, and even Milena seems to be happy with the idea, probably because she considers Jacquetta to be another older sister.

This is the right thing to do. This is the *only* thing to do.

I can't stay with him. Because what's broken between us isn't fixable.

But if that's the case, why does it feel like someone's ripping my chest open again? Why is guilt gnawing at the insides of my mind, ready to tear me apart? I watch as Saint's home fades into the dark night.

And before I know it, we're sitting outside Jacquetta's mansion. Jaspar, Milena, and Giulietta climb the stairs to the front door with a wave, and Jacquetta ushers them inside with a knowing nod to me.

I take a deep breath, moving my hand over my stomach.

"Where to?"

"Um..." I pause. It's late, and I have a room booked at a hotel next to the airport for tonight because the flight is early tomorrow morning. But I don't want to be by myself right now. The walls of the cab close in, and I can feel panic settle in my chest, its icy claws clutching at my throat. "Can you drop me off at this outlet mall?" I ask through gritted teeth as my chest labors faster. I shove my phone at him as I try to remain calm. In control.

The driver arches a brow but nods. I relax into the backseat. Tears burn my eyes, and I blink furiously to keep them back. This is for the best.

It has to be.

And yet, that voice in the back of my head, the one that clings to some flicker of hope, tells me it's not. Saint might lose it when he sees I'm gone, and maybe a small part of me wants him to be a wreck like I am, instead of his cool and indifferent self. But that only fuels the guilt strangling me.

We're not done, not by a long shot. His words rattle around in my brain until I squeeze my eyes shut. We are. We are done. There's nothing left of what we could have been.

"Miss?"

I open my eyes and realize the cab's stopped. "Right. Sorry." I dig through my purse and pay him.

I step out into the frigid air, wheeling my small case behind me. The outlet mall is still bustling and brimming with shoppers. I take a deep inhale, pulling my jacket a little tighter around me.

I pick a store at random to browse in. After walking around both floors and looking at some beautiful crockery, I step out of the store and wonder which one I should go in next. People are strolling around, browsing, sipping coffees, and laughing softly. I should feel at ease.

But I don't.

There's this... prickling on the back of my neck.

A weird sensation like I'm being watched.

I throw a casual glance over my shoulder. A man stands a few stores down. Dark jacket, dark pants, hands in his pockets.

He could be waiting for someone. It's totally normal.

I shake it off and walk on.

After a few more stores, I dart into a gift boutique, pretending to examine a display of candles. The sweet scent of vanilla and cinnamon is almost overwhelming, but I welcome the distraction. After a few minutes, I peek through the glass storefront.

But he is still there.

Leaning against the railing outside. Still waiting. Still watching.

And I know that's definitely not normal. My heart gives a stutter. Why the hell did I think I'd be okay for one evening without Saint's bodyguards? *Crap, crap, crap.*

A bead of sweat rolls down my spine. He has to be one of Carmine's men. They've finally caught me by myself. And now they're going to grab me. *Oh shit!*

I pretend to look around for another minute before slipping out the side entrance and cutting through to the opposite side of the courtyard. I duck into a boutique selling athletic wear, heart pounding much harder now. Maybe it's a coincidence. Maybe I'm being paranoid...

My hands shake as I hover near a rack of leggings, watching the entrance through the mirror above the checkout counter.

The bell chimes.

He enters. Slowly.

My stomach flips, bile rising in the back of my throat.

He doesn't even look at the clothes—just scans the store like he's searching for something. For someone. *For me.*

I crouch down on unsteady legs and pretend to look at socks.

I clench and unclench my fists, trying in vain to stop the shaking. Okay, Em, deep breath...

I dart across the aisles and rush out the other door, speed-walking now but trying to look normal. I don't want to cause a scene. I don't want to overreact. But every instinct in my body is screaming at me to get out of here.

I spot a small store across the path—lace dresses and pastel handbags in the window. I push through the door and try to calm my breathing. A young woman behind the counter gives me a polite smile. I nod, wiping my sweaty palms against my outfit, then head toward the back, crouching behind a rack of long skirts.

The door chimes again.

I don't even need to look.

He's here.

My breaths are coming in shallow pants now. And I really feel like I'm going to vomit. I fumble with my phone, hands shaking too much to type in my passcode right away. I finally get it open. And I swipe to the dial pad to call for help.

But then I feel it.

And I jump out of my skin as a huge hand seizes my arm in a vice-like hold.

I scream out.

But not a single sound passes my lips. Because fear has stolen my voice and run away with it.

I whirl around, my eyes wide and trying to focus on the man before me as my vision blurs.

And he's right there, too close, his grip tightening. "Keep quiet, or someone will get hurt," he snarls as he starts to drag me out of the store.

Panic surges through me like a flood.

"Let go of me!" I scream, finding my voice and ignoring his words. My voice is high and cracking.

A security guard shouts out. "Hey!" And from somewhere behind us, I hear his sharp voice of authority. "Step away from her. Now."

"She's just my girlfriend," the creep says smoothly. "We had an argument, and I'm just trying to say sorry to her."

"That's not true," I say in a loud voice. "You know I, er, have a restraining order against you. Get away from me. Or I'm, um, calling the cops..." I cross my fingers behind my back, knowing that my lie doesn't sound convincing.

The security guard is tall, uniformed, and has a walkie-talkie crackling at his hip. He lasers me with an assessing look, like he's not sure who is telling the truth here. But then he nods at me and turns to Carmine's goon.

“You need to leave right now, or we’ll have to call the police,” he growls at him.

The goon lets go of me instantly and tries to melt away like it’s all been a misunderstanding, no doubt to bide his time until he can try again.

But the guard is already towering above him. “You need to leave the entire mall. I’m banning you for the next twenty-eight days.”

Another security guard arrives and starts to escort the goon away. He tries to protest, but the guard clamps onto his arm and leads him out, nodding to the store assistant on the way.

I stand there, frozen, until he’s gone.

“Don’t worry, miss,” the first guard reassures me. “He’s gone now. My sister had to get a restraining order against her ex, but the scumbag still tries to contact her all the time.” He shakes his head. “Are you okay?” he asks more gently.

I nod, but my voice is buried somewhere under the fear and adrenaline.

“Yes,” I finally manage. “I think I am now.” I sink onto a small bench by the dressing rooms, heart still hammering.

The security guard approaches me again a few minutes later. “He has been escorted out of the mall.”

I nod again, thanking him and exiting the store.

I was supposed to stay at the hotel tonight, but I know I’ll be safer staying in the mall. It’s a twenty-four hour one, so there’s always shoppers and security guards around. I can get a cab to the airport later. That’s a safer plan than staying in a hotel tonight—because right now, the thought of being all alone in a hotel room utterly terrifies me. What about if one of Carmine’s thugs tries to slip into the hotel room while I sleep? All they would have to do is get their hands on a key used by the housekeeping staff. My blood runs cold at the very thought. No, I’m just going to stay at the mall and then mill around the airport—that’s a much better plan.

My hands shake as I slip into another fancy boutique. I can feel the eyes of the sale assistants on me and offer a polite smile, hoping I don’t look like the mess I feel.

I browse the racks, my fingers skimming the silky fabrics. They’re pretty dresses. Expensive and luxurious. Just the kind of thing that I like.

Licking my lips, I hurry toward another rack, then another.

There are cameras. Assistants. Security.

The incident with Carmine's goon has knocked me off kilter. That and everything else going on with Saint. Because Saint has pushed me to feel out of control and spiral like this. He came into my life and screwed it all up with his sexy smirk and pretty lies.

But for once, I'm not going to steal.

I'm trying to move past that now, going to the therapy group and trying to get my life back on track.

Because I want to be in *proper* control of myself. Have *real* control of my actions. Of my whole damn life for just one second. Where Saint or someone else doesn't get a say in how I feel. *And stealing isn't going to give me that.* The onesie theft showed me that—because after the brief high dissipated, I felt the worst shame I've ever felt.

I just came here today to enjoy seeing the beautiful dresses and touching the sumptuous fabrics. *Window shopping—and that's enough for me right now, thank God.* And I really feel like I've truly turned a corner.

With one last look and a smile, I hurry toward the exit.

One foot in front of the other.

To get on with the rest of my life.

Until a large hand with red talons clamps down on my shoulder. And a voice shrieks in my ear. "I'd recognize those emerald green eyes anywhere. You're the girl who stole those two dresses from me a few months ago...!"

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

S AINT

My jaw is sore from the blow I got there. I'm wound tight, and the job tonight only cranked it higher. It takes way longer than expected, and it's nearly three in the morning when I get back to the mansion. I don't expect anyone to be up, but some part of me wants to have Emerald sitting up in the bed and waiting for me.

Dropping my jacket on the entry table, I make my way quietly up the stairs. A hand drags down my tired face before I work the tension out of my neck.

There's a lot that needs to be said between Emerald and me. A lot of which I'm going to struggle to say. But the thought of her just being here, of being in our bed, eases some of the tightness in my muscles.

I push open the bedroom door, taking care to be quiet.

But I freeze.

Because she's not here.

I turn on my heel to that damn spare room she's been spending so much time in. But it's empty.

My heart pounds in my chest as I make my way down the hall to Milena's room.

I'm about to knock, but I see the door is very slightly ajar. And through the gap, I can see it's empty.

Spinning around, I check Jaspar and Giulietta's rooms. Empty.

The side of my fist slams into the doorframe. "Goddammit!"

I storm back to our bedroom, going through the room again and again, searching frantically for any sign of where she's gone off to.

Of all the things to do, this might take the cake. Because there's still a goddamn target on her back...

My finger jams into the screen of my phone as I dial her cell phone. "C'mon. C'mon. Pick up, Em." It rings six times before her voicemail clicks in. I redial. Again and again.

"Fuck!" The phone smashes into the bathroom door as I hurl it from my hand.

I inhale sharply, trying to get a hold of myself. This isn't me. This is some...some beast Emerald has created. Some beast so addicted to her that he can't bear the thought of being without her. But she's done this, and now she's gone.

Once more in the wind.

Without me.

My chest heaves as I take in the room. Eyes scanning for whatever I can find to help me.

I *will* find her.

And she better hope that when I do, I'm thinking more rationally than I am right fucking now.

And she better hope that I find her before anyone else does...

I slump down on the edge of the bed. Why? Why did she leave? Was it so hard for her to see how hard I was trying when I talked to her during that chess game? I'd thought... I shake my head. That was the problem, wasn't it? I wasn't thinking. Not really.

I'd stuck my foot in my mouth when attempting to show her how I was trying. I was doing the best I could, and it wasn't enough. Emotions and I don't mix. And yet, I tried. I let myself give into that gooey center I've tried so damn hard to ignore I even have.

This isn't like me.

No. This is the man Emerald has turned me into. A man who so desperately wants to be better for her, but at the same time, is failing miserably at it.

She was big enough to say sorry for running out of the wedding and for not telling me about the baby sooner.

But I still couldn't tell her what she needed to hear from me...

Standing up, I grab my shattered phone from the floor and test whether it's still working.

The screen's cracked and blurry, but it'll do.

My hand curls around the black case. I'll have to replace it. But first I need information. My steps are sure and measured as I jog down to the kitchen. I put a pot of coffee on and stare at my broken phone on the counter.

I just need to think like Emerald.

Where would she go?

Where would she take the kids?

She wouldn't put them in danger. So, wherever she is, they're not with her. They're safe and oblivious to what's happening. It's her way of protecting them.

My head hangs between my arms where they rest on either side of my phone.

She could be anywhere, and I hate it. I hate not being able to account for every move she makes. Like she's this one big blind spot in my life.

I know her better than any target I've ever taken down. And yet, I'm at a complete loss where to start.

Someone has to know something. *Anything.*

I snatch up my phone and find the number I need.

Hitting dial, I listen to the ringing tone. I stare up at the ceiling, waiting and letting out a breath to calm my nerves.

"Hello?"

"Jacquetta," I say.

"Saint? What time is it?"

"Where's Emerald?"

"What?"

"Where. Is. Emerald?"

"Look, she dropped the kids here. They were due to stay with me for two weeks anyway and were looking forward to it. She's gone to the Bahamas by herself. She needs the break."

After she tells me all she knows, I hang up and check with the airline. But she never boarded the flight. *Shit.* Where the hell is she?

I call Jacquetta again. "She never got on the flight. What else did she say?"

"That's all she told me."

“You’re her best friend,” I grit out, trying to keep the irritation from my voice. Because snapping at her and demanding something from her isn’t going to get me what I need. “Will you let me know if you hear anything?”

“What are you going to do, Saint?”

“Just ask around for me.”

“Saint, I think—”

“When I know more, I’ll let you know.” I cut her off before hanging up. Another clipped sigh pushes past my lips, and I turn toward the pot of coffee.

Dropping onto a stool, I stare at the dark liquid. The tightness in my chest is uncomfortable and difficult to breathe past. I’m not used to this feeling. Because I’ve never experienced a feeling like this before.

No, that’s a lie.

I have experienced this feeling before.

But it was when I was five years old. And it was the one and only time I allowed myself to feel loss.

Loss.

My grasp tightens around my phone, and the damaged screen cracks further with the force.

This isn’t me. This visceral reaction I’m having to Emerald being in the wind once more makes me feel sick. I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose as I try to think.

I can check the usual places. Make some phone calls and find out if she’s stopped by the casino. I can have contacts keep an eye out for her. I can check in that small town she fled to before and with that old lady, Winifred, she was working for.

That’s how I’ll start.

Because I’m going to find her if it’s the last damn thing I do.

* * *

It’s the next day., and the guards nod at me as I walk up to the mansion belonging to Jacquetta’s family. After knocking and waiting a few moments, the door is opened by a woman who’s obviously the housekeeper.

“I’m here to see Jacquetta.”

“Sir, she’s out right now. She had to run an errand, but she said she’d only be gone thirty minutes, so she’ll be back soon.”

I hear childish squeals in the background. “Never mind. I’m just here to get the kids.”

She frowns at me. “Miss Jacquetta didn’t say anything about this.”

“Mr. Saint!” Giulietta’s voice rings out behind her. She’s dressed in a pink tutu over her dress, and there’s a bucket load of glitter in her hair. But she looks happy. Jaspar’s head, also covered in glitter, appears with a smile and wave.

“Hey, I’m here to take you guys home.”

The housekeeper narrows her eyes, putting herself between me and the kids.

I bite back a growl as I level my gaze on her.

“Who are you, exactly?” she says with a glare at me.

“I’m...” but how do I explain who I am to these kids?

“This is Mr. Saint,” Giulietta says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world as she snatches my hand into her tiny warm grasp. And at that small touch from her, my heart does that pathetic little thump.

“I can’t just let you take the kids,” the housekeeper announces. “Nobody mentioned anything about this. Is Miss Emerald in the car or something?”

“No. She’s still...away. She asked me to get the kids on my way home.” I lie, watching as Giulietta quickly packs her things into her backpack before directing Jaspar to do the same as if she’s the boss.

She folds her arms across her chest. “Not until I hear from Miss Emerald.”

“They’re *mine*.”

“Not until I hear it from Miss Emerald or Miss Jacquetta. You could be a murderer for all I know.” *Oh, lady, if only you knew...* She’s getting on my last damn nerve, and I just about resist the urge to snap at her that the guards wouldn’t have let me pass if they didn’t know who I was.

“Look, lady, I get you’re just trying to keep them safe—”

“It’s okay.” Milena’s voice rings out as she saunters up to the door, eating a granola bar. “He’s Emerald’s fiancé.”

The housekeeper eyes me up and down. “Oh, *it’s him*.” Great. I wonder what not-so-wonderful things she’s heard about me. The woman sighs as

she pulls out her phone from the pocket of her apron. "I need to clear it with Miss Jacquetta since none of the family are home right now."

I tap my foot impatiently as she dials Jacquetta. "Miss, there's a grumpy man here who I think is Miss Emerald's fiancé. He says he's here to take the kids." There's a pause as Jacquetta says something in response. The housekeeper narrows her beady gaze at me. "What is he like? Well, he's dressed all in black and looks like a serial killer. *Oh, and he's cold and emotionless...*"

Okay, she's definitely heard all about me from Emerald and Jacquetta.

She holds out her phone to me. "She wants to talk to you to make sure you're who you're claiming to be."

I snatch the phone from her, barely suppressing my scowl. "Jacquetta, I'm taking the kids home. I don't even know why Emerald brought the kids here. Their home is with me."

There's a long pause. "Okay, Saint. But on the condition that if you need to work, you call me to come over and babysit. Okay?"

"Fine. Have you heard anything from her?"

"No," Jacquetta responds. "But I'll keep trying her cell and ask around."

"Thanks," I murmur.

"I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it for her," Jacquetta grits out.

I bite back a smile. At least someone is loyal to Emerald. "Noted."

Handing the phone back to the housekeeper, she speaks briefly with Jacquetta before hanging up. "Okay, children," she announces. "You're going home."

Finally. I stop myself from rolling my eyes as I hoist Giulietta into my arms and head back to my car with Jaspar and Milena either side of me.

"I tried to teach them how to play chess," Jaspar tells me, shaking his head and dusting my arm in green glitter. *What the hell did that housekeeper do to my kids?* "But I'm not as good at explaining the rules like you."

I nod, slowly making my way to the car and feeling that pit in my stomach loosen slightly now that I know the kids are safe. One problem down; only about a million more to go.

Carefully, I buckle them into their booster seats, dusting the glitter from my arms. "Why are you two covered in glitter?"

"We did arts and crafts!"

"Oh."

“Giulietta got it on my picture, so I got it on hers.” Jaspar sticks his tongue out at his sister, and I can’t help my snort. It’s the first drop of amusement I’ve felt in what feels like a long while.

Milena gives the nosy Nancy of a housekeeper a wave before getting in.

As we drive back to my mansion, Jaspar tells me all about their sleepover, including the battle of cowboys and spaceships, complete with sound effects.

My eyes are glued to the road, but every so often, they drift to the backseat. The image of another car seat with a baby keeps popping into my head, and I have to force myself to snap back to reality.

By the time we’ve pulled up to the house, Giulietta’s drifted off, and Milena’s bored expression has changed. “Is...Em going to be okay?”

I stop as we climb the front steps. “Yeah, she’s going to be fine, Milena. She just needs some time to unwind. She’s stressed.”

“Is that why she ran out on the wedding? She’s stressed? I’m not a kid. I can handle whatever’s going on.”

I swallow hard and start walking up the steps again, careful not to jostle Giulietta who’s sleeping in my arms. “Nothing’s going on. We’re just working things out. She needs some time, and I’m giving it to her.”

“Whatever.”

“Milena, just cut her some slack, yeah? She’s just trying to do what’s best for you all, and it’s not always easy for her.”

“I know. She’s just...” Her voice drifts off.

“Very Emerald?”

Milena gives me a small smile. “Yeah, exactly.” And with that, I let us into the house and carry Giulietta upstairs, with Jaspar and Milena following us.

Milena heads straight for her room, and twenty minutes later, I’ve gotten both Giulietta and Jaspar tucked into bed.

“Is Em going to be here to take us to school?” Giulietta asks sleepily from where she’s burrowed into her pink down comforter.

“I don’t know.” I don’t want to lie to her.

“Will you take us, Mr. Saint?”

“Of course.”

“Good.”

“Don’t worry, Giulietta. I’m here to stay. I’ll even make you something good to eat for breakfast.”

She gives me a sleepy smile. “Goodnight, Mr. Saint.”

“Goodnight, kid. Sleep well.”

My footsteps are heavy as I walk down the dark hall toward my empty bedroom. Exhaustion weighs down my body, but my mind is whirling. Shucking off my shirt and pants, I lay on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

I can still smell her in the bed, and my heart squeezes in my chest. I check my phone one more time. No news. No hints as to where she could be. I’ve got the best guys tracking her down, but there’s nothing so far.

I bite back a wince at the pain in my sternum. If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought it was heartburn. But I do know better. The hollow feeling, the emptiness that seems to be seeping into my bones the longer she’s gone, just keeps growing and growing. Eventually, it’ll swallow me whole again, and like twenty-four years ago, I’ll have to claw myself out of it.

Only this time, I don’t think I’ll survive it.

I toss and turn all night, eventually waking in a cold sweat of nightmares featuring my parents and Emerald. Shoving up from the bed, I try to forget the image of a dead Emerald lying beneath Carmine’s boot. *Fucking Carmine Cicconi*. Rubbing my tired eyes, I know it’s time to get up, and with lead-weighted steps, I make my way downstairs.

The smell of fresh pancakes fills the air as Jaspar and Giulietta talk around the breakfast table while Milena taps away on her phone with intent concentration.

“Milena, can you braid my hair?” Giulietta asks her with a hopeful smile.

“No.”

“Braids look dumb,” Jaspar interrupts.

Giulietta glares at her brother. “They do not!”

“Do too!” Jaspar yells.

“Do not!”

“Do too!”

“Do not!” Giulietta shoots him a look that could make hell freeze over. “And Jaspar, if you want your stuffed crocodile to still be alive by the end of today, you better not say anything else about my hair!”

A look of alarm floods Jaspar’s face as he clamps his lips shut. Giulietta can be utterly terrifying when she wants to be.

She flicks her hair over her shoulder with a look of satisfaction at Jaspar’s silence before turning back to her sister. “Please, Milena? Em isn’t

here to do it.”

“No.” Milena is adamant. “I’ve already made you breakfast. Anyway, my friends are here.”

I arch a brow. “I thought I was taking you all to school?”

“No, thanks,” Milena huffs, clearly unimpressed at the idea. “I already have a ride lined up.”

“I’m not riding in the same car as you if you’re wearing dumb braids,” Jaspar clips at Giulietta who hesitates only a second before dumping her bowl of cereal on his head.

“Who has dumb hair now?” she announces with glee. *Jesus fucking Christ.*

Milena pushes back from the table, and I swivel my gaze between her and her siblings, struggling to deal with all three of them at once. “Hold on, Milena! You’re actually going to class, right?”

Now, it’s my turn to be glared at. “Not you too, Saint. I thought you were cooler than this.”

“Yes or no, Milena. I’ll find out either way.”

She sighs. “God, you’re as bad as Em. Yes, I’m going to class.”

“All of them?”

“All of them. *Can I go now?*”

I nod and sit back in my chair with a sigh. How the hell did Emerald do this every day without wanting to at least shoot one of them?

“Mr. Saint?” Giulietta asks, tugging on my sleeve, as Jaspar wipes at his hair with a towel. I might have to shampoo it before we leave as there are bits of Lucky Charms stuck between the strands.

“Yeah?”

“Will you braid my hair?”

“Oh, um... I’ve never done it before.”

“Pleaaase?”

I try to say no, but there’s plenty of time before we have to leave, and I can’t help but buckle. This little girl—actually, make that the entire family—have me so wrapped around their fingers that it’d be comical if it didn’t make my chest ache at the same time. “Okay, but no promises about what it’ll look like. But let’s see what we can do.”

After consulting an online video and being none the wiser, I consult four more similar videos and end up even more confused. I brace myself to

do this. *I can do it.* I'm able to meticulously plan and execute complex assassinations, so this braiding thing should be a walk in the park, right?

Sitting Giulietta on a kitchen stool, I get to work. Her hair is fine and silky, and whenever I cross sections over and go to grab the next section, what I've just done unravels. A scowl settles on my face. The video didn't show this happening. These so-called social media influencers are fucking liars. You can't learn to French braid hair in '*six minutes and seven easy steps.*' There must be laws against false advertising like this—against people who spend all their lives lying.

Twenty minutes later, my fingers all have cramps, sweat is shining on my brow, and I feel like I've run a fucking marathon. But with a smile of satisfaction, I spin Giulietta around in the chair to take a look at herself in the mirror I've propped up on the kitchen island.

She looks at her reflection in the mirror, and her gaze widens. "You've made me look like a *scarecrow!*" she squeals. She's obviously inherited Emerald's tendency to be overdramatic...

"Oh, come on, it's not that bad," I try.

"Yeah, it is," Jasper scoffs as he folds his arms over his chest. *Jeez, they're a difficult crowd to please.* "It looks like she's been dragged through a hedge backward," he announces with relish. "Told you, Giulietta, that you'd look dumb with braids, and this just proves it."

"You're not being very helpful here," I grit out at him.

"Emerald told us *to never lie,*" he pipes up. And the way he says it makes me freeze. Christ, I hope she hasn't been trying to convince them that I'm nothing but a liar.

"Look, I'll search online and see if I can find some tips on how to improve it by tomorrow," I promise, just wanting to see her smile. "You know, your hair doesn't look too bad." I give my best attempt at a reassuring tone.

"I don't think this is how it's supposed to look." Her expression falls and her gaze shines. "I just want to look like all the other girls at school..."

My heart squeezes. "I'll practice more today and tonight, so hopefully by tomorrow, I'll be a bit better." And as I say the words, I resolve to master these fucking French braids no matter how long it takes to learn it.

After washing Jasper's hair over the bathroom basin, when I finally get the kids to school, they're late. And I know I'm failing miserably with them so far, but I'm going to turn this around. I'm determined to show Em that I

can be the man she wants me to be and that I'm one hundred percent here for her, the kids, and the baby.

* * *

The following morning, after seven failed attempts and three more online videos, I manage to get Giulietta's hair just about braided before we have to leave for school.

After I secure the hairband in place and show her the finished result, she gives me a beaming smile. It's not perfect, but it's a hell of a lot better than yesterday's attempt.

The little girl reaches up to kiss my cheek, and I'm left standing there, blinking at my reflection in the mirror. That weird fluttering, that feeling that happens when the kids are around, comes roaring to life, pushing away a little of the ache caused by Emerald's absence.

"We're going to be late, and Mrs. Harriet doesn't like that," Jasper complains.

I snap back into action. "No one is gonna be late today, promise." Swiftly grabbing my keys and ushering them out the door, I check my phone once more. No news on Emerald. Still no news. And my heart sinks.

* * *

The days blur together. I'm losing track of how many days she's been gone, but the fact that I haven't heard anything about Emerald arriving in the Bahamas has my stomach twisted into fucking knots, especially because Carmine is still after her.

Horrors of Emerald dead somewhere haunt me at night, and the longer she stays gone, the more anxious I become.

But we're managing. Taking care of the family is my priority. Ensuring they have breakfast, braiding Giulietta's hair, and dropping the kids off on time has become my morning routine.

The rest of each day is spent hunting down Emerald and slowly working on that missing money from the casino. That fucking missing money. I know it's someone who has pull in the organization, but every time I think

I'm close, everything goes quiet. It's starting to piss me off almost as much as not knowing where the hell Emerald is.

I'm a wreck. I can see it in my haggard appearance, the dark circles under my eyes, and the irritation that's made me snap at more than one casino employee.

No one knows a damn thing about the missing money. And yet, in this line of work, I know that's a fucking lie. Someone, somewhere, knows something. I just need to figure out who. And when I do, I'm going to make them sing any and every way I fucking know how.

"Mr. Saint? Is it time for our tea party yet?" Giulietta asks me in a hopeful tone as she interrupts my dark thoughts.

I take a deep breath and suppress my sigh. Crouching onto my haunches so that I'm the same height as her, I make my voice gentle. "Not Mr. Saint. Call me Saint. Just Saint."

Her tiny brow furrows in the same contemplative way that I see Em often do. "But it doesn't sound right."

"Well, what would sound right then?"

She tilts her head to one side, then shoots me a sweet smile. "You're kinda like a dad to us. You know, Jaspar and me never knew our dad."

Her words make me freeze.

"I know you're not really my dad. But Em does a good job looking out for us like a mommy would. And you look out for us like a dad would. And anyway, you're just how I'd want my dad to be."

And my breath lodges in my throat.

"He's not like a dad," Jaspar interrupts. "He more like a big brother."

Giulietta scowls. "No, he looks out for us like a daddy would." She really doesn't like being disagreed with.

"No, big brother," Jaspar insists.

Giulietta's eyes flare. "No, daddy."

But Jaspar isn't backing down. "Big brother!"

"Daddy!" she yells.

"Big brother!" he yells back.

"Daddy!" Jeez, do the two of them ever agree on anything? Giulietta tilts her head to one side. "Maybe we can call him *Big Daddy*?"

And my eyes widen. "No, no, no, that's a bad idea," I say quickly. "How about just Saint?"

She mulls this over for a few long moments. “Okay!” she trills, already forgetting her earlier objection to this.

I exhale. “Good, great.”

But then she looks slightly panicked. “But you will still be a daddy to my teddy bears, won’t you?” she asks in a small voice.

And I swallow down the knot in my throat. “Of course. I’m always going to be here for you, Jaspar, Milena, Em, and even...*your teddy bears.*” The last words stick in my throat, but I’ll say and do whatever this little girl needs to feel safe in this big bad world. And I’ll do whatever Emerald needs as well.

“You know, Mr. Saint...” She’s already forgotten that she agreed to drop the Mr. from my name. “I reckon the new baby’s gonna have an amazing life with you and Em as its mommy and daddy.” Somehow, Milena found out that Em is pregnant, probably via Jacquetta, and now Giulietta and Jaspar know as well. “Because you know how to braid hair now. And how to take us to school on time. And the baby will probably get to have a tea party every single day as well...”

And when she says that, a piece of my heart swells. If she reckons Emerald and me are doing a good job at parenting them all, then I know we’ve got a great chance of making this family work. Because in my mind, that’s what we are now. Me, Emerald, Milena, Jaspar, Giulietta, and the baby—a *proper family*.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

S AINT

Finally. Finally, I've found the fucking traitor who's been stealing the money and investing in the trafficking ring.

It was one of our captains, Armando Barbieri. Fucking asshole. What the fuck was he thinking getting involved with the Croatians?

Before I go to see Christian, I call a new hacker I found a while ago and tell him it's time. I've had this planned for a while now. And after giving him a couple of hours to do his thing, I take the necessary information to Christian.

Walking into the office at the casino, I toss the printouts in front of him. "Found the traitors."

"Traitors, as in plural?"

"Yeah. It's all there in black and white."

He picks up the papers and sits back in his chair. A frown pulls his features as he reads through them. "So, Armando Barbieri?"

"Yeah," I reply.

He shakes his head. "Kill the fucker. Never liked him anyway."

"Consider it done, boss."

Christian looks up from the papers and looks hard at me. "And Carmine Cicconi was involved too?"

"Yeah." I'm silent for a few long moments. "Everything you need is in those papers."

He eyeballs me. “You mean, everything I need if anyone challenges me on why I gave the go ahead for Carmine to be killed?”

“Yeah.” I never could hide anything from Christian.

“Kill him too,” he says quietly.

I nod. Christian knows why I need to do this. He knows I’ve set Carmine up so that I can take him out and keep Emerald safe.

I take care of Barbieri first, taking him out cleanly and efficiently. A single bullet to the head. As much as I want to torture the fucker and take my time, I’m burning to get to Carmine. To end that fucker before he can do anything more to Emerald.

On my way to Carmine, I make a quick stop to kill that fucker, Alberto, for daring to insult Emerald that time with that stupid bet comment. Another single bullet to the head.

And then I get onto the man I really want. Carmine. I already know his daily movements by heart. I’ve been surveilling him since I came up with the plan to frame him.

Every evening, he goes to the gym at 5 p.m. Although his waistline doesn’t look to be helped by his frequent workouts, which is hardly surprising given his *gym* is actually the home of a hooker.

By the time he arrives, I’ve already paid off the hooker to leave town and never come back.

He’s got his own key, and I hear the door open and close. Then I hear his heavy tread of footsteps up the staircase. As he walks in, he already has his tiny dick pulled out of his pants. And the first thing he sees is me sprawled back in the armchair and pointing a gun at his head.

“*Saint...?*”

“Yeah.”

“W-where’s Madeline?”

“Gone. I think she’s squeamish around blood.”

His tiny dick shrivels even smaller. “Look, you don’t want to start anything with me,” he blusters.

“I think I do. Because you’ve put out a hit on Emerald. Made her goddamn afraid for herself, but worse, terrified for her siblings.”

“Look, why do you care about her anyway? She fucking stood you up at the altar!”

I shoot him in the left knee. “That’s your first mistake. Mentioning that. Because I’m still touchy about the subject. And for your information, we’re

still getting married.”

He’s whimpering in pain as blood soaks the leg of his pants, only just managing to stay standing as he braces himself against the wall. “For God’s sake, Saint! From what I’ve heard, she left you. You don’t even know where the whore is—”

I stand up from the armchair and shoot him in the right knee, and he collapses to the floor with a thud and writhes in pain. “That’s mistake number two. Calling her a whore. She’s worth one hundred fucking times what you’re worth. And no one calls her a whore—ever.”

He’s fucking sniveling now as he pleads with me. “We can work something out... How much will it take? I’ve g-got money. We don’t need to...fall out over some dumb ho...”

“And that’s mistake number three.” And I shoot him in the head. Silencing him forever. No one calls her a ho. No one talks like that about Emerald or threatens her goddamn life.

I walk over to where his body has fallen at an awkward angle. I love the sound of my gun. But also, I love the silence that comes after a hit. Silence that tells me all is well in the world again.

Because the fucker should have known better than to mess with the best hitman the Imperiosi’s got.

* * *

The following day, my phone vibrates just after I’ve dropped the kids at school. I’ve exhausted everything. Contacts in transportation. Contacts in different states. My reach is wide and far, but still fucking nothing.

My eyes drift to the new message, and I brake hard before I hit the car in front of me, veering left and pulling over to the side of the road. I open the message in full, my eyes rushing to scan the message and attachment.

Dread and relief wash over me at the same time. My fingers dial my contact, and I drum my fingers against the steering wheel as I wait for him to answer.

“You’re sure?” I bark out.

“Yeah. I came across the report while I was filing some paperwork for that job on the waterfront. Looks like your girl got caught for stealing dresses from some boutique.”

“What? When? Is she okay?”

“They haven’t moved her yet. There’s some overcrowding problem and paperwork issues, so she’s remained in holding for the last few days.”

“Fuck.”

“What’s so special about her?”

“You don’t need to know that, Rawlins,” I snap.

“Right. Er, sorry. Forgot who I was talking to. The station’s fairly quiet right now if you wanna head over.”

Fuck, do I ever. “Yeah. I’ll be there shortly.”

I hang up before he can say anything else. Of all the scenarios I’ve played in my head over and over again, Emerald getting herself goddamn arrested was not on the list. I sink back into my seat, letting the weight of the last week lessen a little as I sit there, my head thrown back against the headrest. A rough disbelieving laugh leaves me. “Only you, Emerald. Only you.” I shake my head as I dial Christian’s number.

“Saint. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I found her. Tell Jacquetta and Nicki.”

“Where?”

“Not important. She’s safe.”

“Thank God. Jacquetta and Nicki have been going crazy.”

“Yeah, I can relate.” That’s the understatement of the century. I’ve lost my goddamn mind these past days, each hour worse than the last one.

“Saint, are you about to do something I should know about?”

“Nope.”

“That doesn’t sound reassuring,” he clips.

“When have I ever done anything without a good reason?”

“Saint—”

“I just called to let you know I’ll be unavailable today. I’ve got a promising lead to follow about where the missing money is being held, but I’ve got to sort out things with Emerald first.” Because even though I’ve dealt with Armando Barbieri, I still have the last of the missing money to locate.

“So, dealing with Emerald is more important?”

“*Don’t, Christian.*”

He chuckles. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re an asshole, you know that?”

Christian’s laugh fills the speaker.

I shake my head. “I’m headed to Emerald right now. Just tell Jacquetta she can stop with the messaging every hour, okay?”

“Fine. Call if you need anything, Saint.”

But the only thing I need is to see Emerald’s face. I don’t know if I’m more relieved or pissed. Of all the damn ways this could have gone, her getting caught shoplifting isn’t what I expected. My molars grind into one another as I hang up the call and merge back into the traffic. My hand flexes around the steering wheel, and my foot presses on the gas as I weave in and out of the cars clogging up the street.

Seeing her is all I can think about. And the feelings that roar to life in my chest fuel my speeding, but not as much as my need to see her. To see her with my own eyes.

This time without her has brought on a new kind of misery. A new kind of black pit swallowing me whole.

I want Emerald.

I’ve wanted her for a long time.

I was just too dumb to see that I wanted her in the only way that mattered.

Not just because she challenges me.

Not just because she pushes me.

But because she also makes me feel things.

Things I haven’t felt in so long.

I didn’t know what love was.

Maybe I still don’t. But whatever it is, it’s with Emerald. It’s with the baby. It’s with Milena, Jaspar, and Giulietta. It’s with *our family*.

And I’ll be damned if I’m not going to fight tooth and nail for her now.

Lesson learned. She wanted me to fight for us. So be it.

I’ll give it everything I can. I’ll show her that she matters the world to me.

If she runs, I follow. Every single time.

If she thinks she’s unworthy, I’ll prove her wrong. Every damn day for the rest of my life.

Emerald is it for me.

She’s the only person who’s come into my life and made me feel something in that lump of coal I call my heart. And she’s made it beat in a way it hasn’t in well over two decades. She’s worked her way under my skin and stayed there. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.

I was a damn fool for thinking I could pretend to be with Emerald and not fall over that edge.

She even *apologized* to me for running out of the wedding and not telling me about the baby. But I still couldn't tell her how I really feel about her...

It was a dangerous game of chess.

And I lost.

And gladly so.

But the problem isn't how I feel. *It's voicing it.* It's telling her that she's the only woman I want. She's it for me. I want her. The good parts and the bad parts. The sunshine smiles, the stealing, and the OCD—all of it.

I slam the car into park outside the precinct and stride into the building.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Emerald Fiorelli."

"Who?"

My jaw tightens. "Emerald Fiorelli."

"Sir, I don't—"

"It's okay, Chen, I've got him. He's a friend," Rawlins says from behind the counter. Officer Chen buzzes me back, and I fall into step beside Rawlins. "Rough night?" he asks.

"What?"

"You look exhausted."

"Yeah, something like that. Where is she?"

"Down the hall. It's the last holding cell on the right."

I push past him, my feet carrying me before my mind can process what's happening. What do I even say to her? For a man so hellbent on being ten or twelve steps ahead of everyone, Emerald leaves me second guessing myself and questioning everything I know.

She leaves me out of control.

I hate it.

But I love it at the same time.

I slow myself down, shoving my hands into my pockets as I approach her cell. She's curled up on the small bench, arms crossed.

My tongue runs across the flat of my teeth as I take her in. I trace over her body, a rumble of fury and relief rising to the top of my chest.

I lean against the bars of the cell. "You know they give you a phone call."

Her gaze snaps to mine. “What are you doing here?”

“Could ask you the same thing. I have to say, Emerald, you really find the best places to hang out at.”

She slings her legs over the edge of the bench, sitting up. “Are you here to rub it in or bail me out?”

“Neither.”

“So, you’re just leaving me in here?” Her voice splutters in disbelief.

“I didn’t say that now, did I?”

She swallows back. And that’s when I see it. A crack in the strong Emerald I’ve come to see over the last few months. I lean further into the bars.

“Is this you telling me I told you so?” Her voice breaks, and my heart squeezes.

“No. It’s not that.”

“Then what? Why are you here, Saint?”

I stare at her. Her arms are wrapped around her chest, and she clenches her jaw like she’s trying so hard not to fall apart. Always the strong and confident Emerald. Always putting on a front that she doesn’t need anyone. “Because you’ve been gone for days, and I just found out you got thrown in jail for shoplifting. I needed to see you to believe it.”

“So, it is an I told you so.”

I shake my head, letting out a sigh. “No, Em. It’s not. It’s an ‘I’ve been up every night, tearing apart the city looking for you, and I’ve been worried about you for goddamn days, thinking God knows what’s happened to you and thinking we’re going find your body floating in the river, courtesy of Carmine.”

She just stares at me.

I turn from the bars, trying hard to hold onto that calm indifferent mask. “Why didn’t you call me? I could have bailed you out days ago. You’re lucky one of the officers works for the Imperiosi, or you’d have been shipped off to county lock up to wait for a trial. I mean, who did you call if it wasn’t me?”

“My mom.”

I step closer to the bars. “Why, Em? Did you really think she was going to help?”

She sniffs. “No. But I hoped she’d tell someone who could.”

I sigh, resting my head against the bars as my eyes close. “Why’d you call her over me?”

“Because I...didn’t think you cared, Saint.”

It’s like a stab to my heart, and I bite the inside of my cheek to stop making a sound. I deserve the blow. I deserve everything she’s about to hurl at me. But I just want her to lean on me. To know she can trust me to catch her when she falls. It hurts more than I care to admit to see her like this. To know she chose her deadbeat of a mother over me.

“You don’t get it, do you, Saint?”

“Get what, Em?”

“That you hurt me. The whole fake fiancée stuff was bad enough. Because until you proposed, I thought you didn’t consider me good enough to be...your *real* fiancée.” Her voice cracks. “And then after the proposal, after you never told me *you loved me*, what was I supposed to think?” Her voice is a whisper now. “What am I still supposed to think? Everyone else thinks I’m unworthy. And it hurts that you think the same. *It hurts that you still don’t think I’m good enough to fall in love with.*”

I shake my head. “Do you know what it was like to think that I was too late? To think that the image of you in a body bag was going to become real?” My hand curls around the bar. “To think that the only person I’ve *loved* since I was five might be dead and I was helpless to stop it? Helpless to stop it again?”

There’s the slightest tremble in her bottom lip, and the swiftest swipe at her eyes. And I see that hard thick shell she’s built around herself crumbling.

And that’s when I see the real Emerald.

The one she hides from the world.

Scared of being alone.

Scared of being seen as less.

Scared of being herself.

This is the Emerald I’ve seen in glances here and there. Brief moments where she’s shown me who she really is. This is the Emerald who’s managed to worm her way into my life. And I almost lost her.

My heart clenches, and I can’t find my voice as I stare at her. I want to reach out to her. Brush the tears from her face and tell her that she, her siblings, and our baby are the most important things to me in the whole world.

But she won't believe me.

Not yet.

And I don't blame her.

"Emerald..." But my voice trails off.

Because I don't know how to fix this.

How to show her that I do mean every damn promise and word I've said to her.

How to fucking show her that I do love her.

Now comes the hard part. The part that makes my palms sweat and heart race. How I show her that I love her, I haven't a fucking clue. But I have to figure it out—or lose her forever. *And that isn't happening.* I tell myself it's just another chess game I've yet to figure out. But when I do, Emerald is going to be mine until death do us part. "I'm sorry, Em..." And jaw tightening, I step back from the bars and give her a curt nod as I turn to leave.

Her eyebrows shoot up. "That's it? What about getting me out of here?" she squeals.

I take another step, then stop. "I'll figure it out, Em."

"What are you going to do? Hold on, you can't kill a police station full of cops!"

I roll my eyes. Of course she'd think that. That's the kind of monster I am, right? The hitman without a heart. "I wasn't planning on it, Emerald." I go to walk away but stop once more. "And for the record, Emerald, you and me? We were never fake. I lied to you, but I'm done lying."

And then I walk away for real.

"Saint!" And that's the last thing I hear as I keep walking away...

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

EMERALD

I chip away at my nail varnish as I watch officer after officer do their rounds of the cells. Officer Rawlins brought me a bag of chips and a bottle of water and comes to check on me once in a while.

I don't know how long it's been since Saint left. I don't know how long it's been since I let the tears fall.

"Still doing okay, Ms. Fiorelli?"

"Yeah, still the same since you last came in like half an hour ago." I look carefully at him. "Why are you doing this?"

"I owe Saint a couple favors. Looking out for you is just me being a good cop."

I manage a grin. "Pretty sure being on the Imperiosi's payroll negates that."

"Maybe. But I'd rather not answer to Saint if something were to happen. I like breathing."

Of course. I fight the urge to roll my eyes.

"Just holler if you need something, okay?" As nice as Officer Rawlins is, he's still a cop, and being around them makes me feel more than a little uneasy. I chew the inside of my cheek as I stare at the blank brick wall.

Is this Saint's way of figuring things out? By telling some cop to keep an eye out for me while I'm in this godforsaken place? It's got to be late by now. I've taken to tossing the bottle of water in the air to pass the time.

He could have bailed me out.
He could have left with me in tow.
Instead, he just walked away.

'*You and me, we were never fake.*' And my heart plummets as I think it was just another Saint lie in the long list of them. I let the bottle fall to the floor with a hollow thud before me.

"Alright, Ms. Fiorelli, you're free to go."

My brow puckers. "*What?*"

"The charges were dropped. Sorry for the hold up. You know, paperwork and all that."

I stare as Officer Rawlins opens the cell door. "But I don't understand?"

"You don't wanna leave?"

"Uh, no," I say quickly, bolting out of the cell before he can change his mind and following him down the hall. "I thought the owner was adamant about throwing me in jail?"

He shrugs. "Change of heart or something like that."

A change of heart? Hardly. I shake my head as he guides me toward where another officer is pouring my things from a plastic bag.

"You can go on and change in there," the second officer directs me.

"Uh, thanks." I grab my clothes, trying to put things together. Did Saint manage to do this? *Jesus, did he kill the woman who owns the boutique?* My heart thumps in my chest. He did. There's no other way around it. *Oh God...*

I quickly change back into my jeans, sweater, and jacket. I scoop up the chessboard keychain from the table, and after gazing at it for a few long moments, I slip it into my pocket. And then I'm buzzed out of the custody area and find Saint leaning against the wall and waiting for me.

"You know, you need to stick to more legal activities during your free time, Emerald."

"Says the assassin."

"Christ, keep your voice down until we're at least out of here." He looks me up and down. "Is that outfit warm enough?"

"It's fine."

"It's cold out there," he says, pushing from where his shoulder rests against the wall. He's wearing a black sweater, leather jacket, and light scarf. It shouldn't make him look as good as it does, and I curse myself for even noticing.

“I’ll be fine. How’d you do it, Saint?”

“What?”

“How’d you get them to drop the charges? Is the owner still alive? Did you threaten her? Put a lean on her?”

“Put a lean on her?” he asks, brow arched. The corner of his lip tugs up, and despite everything—despite the gaping hole in my chest—his smile makes my stomach flip. He unwinds his black scarf and wraps it around my neck, his gentle touch making me shiver. “No, I didn’t put a lean on her—not sure what the hell that even means. I didn’t kill her or threaten her.”

“But if you didn’t do those things, then how did you do it?”

He shakes his head as he pushes open the doors to the outside.

I grab his arm. “Tell me how you did it.”

“I bought the boutique.”

“What?”

“Keep walking, Emerald. The kids’ play date is almost up, and my men will be bringing them home soon. I’m not going to hear the end of it if I’m late making their dinner.”

But I stop in my tracks. “And since when did you start caring about play dates and stuff like that?”

He whirls around. “Since you came into my life.”

I hesitate for a second, not sure if he’s telling me the truth about any of it—the boutique, the caring about the kids’ play dates, and everything else.

He looms over me. I swallow thickly as I look up at him. “I bought the boutique, Emerald. And as owner, I get to decide whether to drop the charges.”

I blink before searching his eyes for some hint he’s lying. This is some joke. It has to be. Why would he do something like buying the boutique if he could just go in and threaten or kill the owner? Is he lying because he doesn’t want me to think he’s bad for killing someone? But looking into his gaze, I see no hint of lies. And the only thing I see is something that makes my body tingle and throat run dry. I feel my brow tug up as I continue to stare up at him. “You really bought it? A whole dress store...?”

“I really bought it.”

“That’s crazy, Saint. You know that, right?”

He tilts his head to one side and gives me a look. “No more crazy than you stealing yet another dress to add to the one hundred and thirty-six unworn stolen dresses you already have in your closet.”

“Hold on, *you counted them?*” I mean, I know I went a bit overboard with my stealing when I was living in that small town, but still, incredulity drips from my voice over the fact that he counted them.

He shrugs. “I was trying to distract myself from worrying about where the hell you were. Em, you don’t need to steal these damn dresses. I’ll buy you any dress you want. Hell, I’ve just bought you another six hundred and eighty-seven dresses that come with the boutique, so you can have all of those too. Just *please* stop stealing before you get yourself into big trouble.”

“I wasn’t actually stealing this time. The owner recognized me from a previous time I stole something. I wasn’t thinking, and it was so stupid of me to return to the same place.”

“Well, the charges are dropped now, Emerald.”

I can’t believe he just bought a whole boutique. My mouth parts slightly, and I try to find words to protest it all. But the emotion I see in his dark eyes dries them up before they can even form.

His hand cups my face, thumb brushing the apple of my cheek. “You, the baby, your siblings. You’re my family. And I’ll do anything to protect that. There isn’t a goddamn thing in this world I wouldn’t do to prove to you that I’m not lying. I’m not the greatest with this shit. But I’m trying here, Em.”

My heart is lodged in my throat.

“Em, say something...please.”

“Why not just post the bail?”

“It can’t go to court if the charges are dropped.”

“Oh.”

“Oh? That’s all you have to say?”

“I’m thinking...processing. Not all of us have your stupidly fast brain.”

He shakes his head before he starts walking again out of the precinct with a curt nod to a few of the officers.

I follow him, and we walk through the parking lot to the car. I curl into my coat a little more, not ready to admit that his scarf does help with the biting cold. “You can’t just buy a boutique and expect it all to be fine, Saint—”

He steps closer, trapping me between the car door and his body. My heart races in my chest as he looks down at me.

“Em, stop talking and just listen.”

“You don’t get to boss me around.”

“Oh, I sure as hell do.”

I want to protest, but I can't. Because the man's just bought a whole goddamn dress boutique so I can avoid criminal charges and court.

My heart does that little flip it always seems to do around Saint.

And I wait for him to continue.

Because I'm too damn curious to stop now...

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CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

S AINT

My heart is hammering in my chest as I step closer to Emerald. Just being with her makes my heartbeat triple in rate. I'm almost certain my watch is about to start blaring at me that I'm close to cardiac arrest. That's what Emerald Fiorelli does to me every single damn time she's near. Whether she's beating me at chess, stealing my wallet, *or just plain stealing my heart.*

I cup her face again, relishing the warmth of her skin against my hand.

I close my eyes and press my forehead against hers, taking a deep breath. Eyes opening, I search her green gaze and wait for some sign that I'm about to fuck up the only thing that matters to me. The only thing that's ever mattered to me since I was five years old.

That lump in my throat grows, and I hear my swallow as I try to find the words to begin apologizing for everything I've fucked up with this woman.

"The last seven days were a fucking lifetime without you, Em."

She tilts her head to one side but says nothing.

"I'm sorry, Em. *About everything.*"

Still silence from her.

"Look, if you want me to beg, Emerald, I will."

Her response is immediate. "Okay. Go ahead."

"Huh? Wait...what?"

"*Beg.* I want to hear what you have to say, Saint."

I examine her face, but there isn't the slightest hint of her sunshine smile. She's fucking serious. *Oh fuck.*

"I'm waiting," she says.

"Don't you think that maybe you're taking this a little too far, Emerald?" I grit out.

She just pierces me with her gaze.

I drag my hand through my hair. "Look, Emerald, if you want me to beg, I'll beg. You're the only woman I've ever wanted in my whole goddamn life, and I'll do whatever it takes to get you back."

She merely continues to stare at me.

Panic is rising in my throat.

But at least I prepared something. That's me—always thinking ten steps ahead. Always with a plan. Always able to outsmart the other person. But this time, it's about something a thousand times more important than some kill I've got to carry out.

I clear my throat. "I am unworthy of your attention, consideration, and love. I know that you'll probably never forgive me, but I could never live with myself if I didn't tell you today exactly how I feel. My heart has ached so much that I've felt like I was bleeding out and inching toward a slow, painful death. Your love is my lifeline. It's my one and only anchor. It's what makes me breathe. I can't live without you. I'm like a sea without a wave. Oh, er, I mean a wave without, um, a sea—"

She interrupts with a huff. "Did you get this from a book, Saint?"

"Um, so I'm also not going to lie to you anymore. So...yes, I did get it from a book."

She narrows her gorgeous green eyes at me.

"Em, I don't apologize very often, so I didn't really know what to say. And as well as negotiating the boutique sale with that old bat, dealing with the district attorney, and bribing the cops, I also had to join a public library and spent ages leafing through God knows how many sappy romance books to find something that was good enough to say to you. I mean, me, Saint Veneti, in a fucking *public library* having to read goddamn *romance novels*—"

"Saint, here's an idea. How about just telling me what you *really* feel?"

I give my head a little shake as if to clear it. "Okay... So, this is even harder than I imagined. I'm not great at expressing my emotions, only at repressing them and pretending that they don't happen to me. That's why I

bought you the boutique. That was the only way I could think to show you what you mean to me.”

I pause to take a deep inhale of breath.

“Em, I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you after Ronnie’s death and that I was jealous. And I’m so sorry I didn’t stop you from walking out after I found out about the baby because I know I should have told you right there and then what you mean to me. You deserve so much better, and I’m sorry I couldn’t give you what you needed from me. That’s totally on me. I’m a fucked up man. But I want to be a better man for you. A man who’s always there for you, for the kids, and for this baby. Because you’re all what matters to me. You’re all what makes me happy. And you’re all what helps me to be a little less fucked up. I’m sorry I made you think that you were only good enough to be my fake fiancée. That was never my intention, and I really messed up. And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you right at the start that I wasn’t a cop. And that I could play chess. And that I was stalking your chess games so that I could get an unfair advantage. And I’m sorry about stealing Jaspar’s Lucky Charms...”

Jesus, as I list it all, I realize how much I’ve fucked up over and over again.

She stays quiet.

“Do you, um, need me to be sorry for keying Ronnie’s car as well?”

“No, you don’t have to be sorry about that,” she clips in a tone that I can’t quite identify.

“Okay, good, because I would find it hard to be truly sorry for that after how he dumped you in such a cowardly way.” I take her hand. “Em, I’m sorry I mess up a lot. But I need you, and I’ll do whatever it takes to persuade you of that.” I take a deep breath. “A king on a chessboard is nothing without his queen. But with his queen by his side, he can achieve anything he wants, *including love*.” I gulp down another breath. “By the way, I didn’t get that from a book. I got it from here.” I tap on the left side of my chest.

She doesn’t react, and I can feel dread sinking through my stomach. Is it too little, too late?

“Em, I know I’ve got a long way to go to be perfect for you, but there’s no one I want more than you and our family. If it takes me buying a whole damn boutique or even a whole fucking shopping mall to show you I’m serious about this, then so be it. But I need you to hear me when I tell you

this. You and me, Em, we're real. And there's nowhere you can go that I won't find you. There's no place you can run that I won't follow. You, Emerald Fiorelli, are worth everything and more to me just the way you are."

My thumb brushes away the tear that trickles from the corner of her eye.

But I press on. Even though my skin itches and I feel exposed and vulnerable. Even though my whole entire body is tense as if I'm pulling a limb from it. I push on because she needs to know this. "Em, I'm here for you. I should have been there for you for the baby news, for Ronnie's death, for you being locked up in jail." I pause before continuing. "I was an asshole about a lot of things, probably more than I care to admit. I'm still a fucking asshole. But I wasn't there for you, and I won't ever be sorry enough." I grasp her face a little tighter, trying to show her how much this means to me. How much *she* means to me.

"Saint—"

"Not done yet, Em." She huffs, and the corner of my lip twitches for a moment. These words feel like acid in my throat. Showing *weakness*, admitting I was wrong? It goes against everything I've learned over the years. But for Emerald, I'll do anything. I'd even rip open my chest and show her the shriveled and broken parts of me that no one else can see. "I'm sorry I'm not a better man. I'm sorry I didn't chase after you like I should have done when you stormed out of the house. I'm sorry you'll have to help me understand all this emotional stuff. I'm sorry I'm probably getting this all wrong too. *But I'm not sorry I'm in love with you. And if you need me to shout out loud to the whole world that I'm in love with you, I'll do it.* Just...will you please come back home with me?"

"Can I talk now?" she asks.

"Depends."

"On?"

"Are you coming back with me, Em?"

The silence beats between us. "It's not that simple, Saint." She looks away. "I need time... And a shower and clean clothes."

My eyes close, and I nod, stepping back from her and letting my hand fall from her cheek. I walk around to the driver's side of the car and slip in without another word.

Of course, I'm too late.

I shoot her a glance as she buckles up. The tension is thick in the car as I try my hardest to think of a way to get her to stay. To give me another chance.

But by the time the house looms before us, Emerald still hasn't said another word.

I park the car and look at her. I need her to realize I'm being as honest, open, and raw as I can be. "Please just stay the night, Em. And if you decide you need to leave, do it in the morning. It's dark out now. You can stay in that other room if you need to. Just...stay. *Please.*"

Wordlessly, she exits the car and moves into the house, leaving me staring after her.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I know she still doesn't believe me.

And I don't know what else I can do.

I bailed her out of jail, bought a multi-million-dollar business to get charges dropped, even went to the library and read sappy romance novels, but none of it is enough to get her to forgive me.

I've totally blown it.

And it's all my own fucking fault.

My fault for thinking that I could carry on being the same cold, aloof Saint Veneti. For thinking that I could keep just throwing her scraps of affection without really letting her into my heart.

I follow her, trying to rack my brain for how to fix this. How to get her to understand that she's all I need and want.

She stands in the entry way, frozen.

"Emerald?"

She doesn't answer, and I take a look around the place. The kids are back from their play date. Giulietta, complete with her wonky braids, and Jaspar are at the small table in the entry doing their homework. Even Milena is. The maid is dusting behind them, and there's a small platter of fruit and vegetables I left for them in the fridge before I went to get Emerald.

"Emerald?"

"You... They're doing their homework?"

"Yes?"

"All of them and without being told?" she murmurs.

“I asked them to get started on it before I came to get you. We’ve worked out a system this last week.”

“And who braided Giulietta’s hair? Milena hates doing it for her...plus, she does, um, much better braids than that when she actually does them.”

I shrug. “I learned to braid hair. And I’m telling you, Emerald, it’s fucking hard,” I say with a grimace.

She looks absolutely stunned at the scene in front of her.

And slowly, she turns around.

The expression on her face does something to me.

Fills some hole in me that’s Emerald-shaped.

She launches herself at me.

And I let out a soft grunt and catch my balance before we both topple over.

“Thank you, Saint!”

“Huh?”

Her voice is thick as she hugs me. “Thank you,” she repeats more softly, but there’s an edge to her voice. “I appreciate everything you did with buying the boutique...but a love story can’t be made out of a one-off grand gesture.”

This doesn’t sound good.

And my heart starts rapidly sinking.

“Saint, a *real love story* is when someone wants to do all the small things for you *every single day*. When a fierce man like you lets his guard down enough to take care of the kids for me. Doing all the mundane tasks that are what family life and love are really about. Being here for me when it really matters. Day in, day out. That’s what real love is.”

Her words make hope start to flare within me. “And is this what *forever* love is, Emerald?”

The silence beats between us.

I hold my breath as I wait for her answer.

“Yes,” she whispers. “It’s the love I want forever and ever.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing.

And I finally feel like I can breathe again.

“*You’re the only woman I want a love story with, Emerald. Only you. It’s only ever been you. You’re the one I love. And I love you so goddamn much.* And I realize now by not telling you that, I was lying by omission. I

was lying to myself and lying to you. And you deserve so much more than that.”

“You buying the boutique was amazing, Saint. But *this*, looking after the kids for me in this way, this means the whole world to me. You’re a much better man than you think.”

I shake my head. “No, Em. *You* make me a better man. Without you, it’s not possible. Because I’d do anything for you, Emerald. Get you out of jail. Buy a whole fucking boutique because there was no way the owner would drop the charges otherwise. Take care of your siblings. Learn to fucking French braid hair and fix lunch. Key the car of the guy who cheated on you. Commit coldblooded murder of a man who tried to touch you without your consent. *There’s no line I wouldn’t cross to ensure you’re safe and happy.* And I’ve never lied about that.”

She grins at me.

“Em, if you need support, back up, or whatever the hell you want to call it, I’m here. You need someone to bail you out of jail, I want to be your call. You need a ride to the casino, I’m the man. You need someone to challenge you in chess, it’s me. It’s only ever going to be me, Emerald. And I’m not going anywhere. You want me to go, you need to give me a damn good reason because it’ll be like cutting off a limb. Do you understand?”

“I can’t believe you actually learned how to braid hair,” she says slowly.

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Yeah, I’m a pro at the braiding now, and I even got the Giulietta stamp of approval and all.”

She holds me tighter, and those broken jagged pieces of my heart start to come together again.

I’m certain she can hear the thumping in my chest and the way everything feels like it’s spinning out of control, and yet, it’s the freefall I didn’t know I needed.

“You keep saying you’re terrible at this stuff, Saint. That you’re some coldhearted man. But look at what you’ve done for me. I’m just a girl you didn’t even like when you first met me. But all the stuff you’ve done since then.” She pulls back a little to look at me. “*No one who is unfeeling or coldhearted would do all that.*”

“Only for you, Emerald,” I say softly. “Only for you. There isn’t a person on this planet I’d do any of that for but you. And for the record, I probably did like you when we first met.”

“Really...?”

“Yeah, Em. There was something about that moment when you wanted me to make a birthday wish...” I see the tears rimming her eyes. “Why are you crying, Em?”

She shrugs. “Can’t help it.”

“I know this won’t be enough, Em, but—”

“Yes, *Saint*.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, I’ll stay. And not just for the night...”

I think I’ve stopped breathing. My brain hasn’t caught up to what she just said, to the words that have just left her lips. “What?”

She gives a laugh, shaking her head. “I said, I’ll stay.”

I can’t help the smile that tugs up the corner of my mouth. “Okay. But Emerald?”

“Yes?”

“I’m not letting you go. Ever.”

She smiles at me. “Good.”

“I’ve been looking for a home all this time, Em. But I’ve been looking for the wrong thing. I’ve been looking for a *place*. But now I realize that home is actually a *person*. And I want you, Emerald, to be that. *My person. My home. My love.*” I tug her even closer before I claim her lips.

“You guys, get a room!” Milena giggles.

I laugh against Em’s lips, letting my forehead rest against hers, before pulling Emerald under my arm as we move into the house fully.

“You’re back!” Jaspar says, noticing me and jumping up, followed quickly by Giulietta.

“Yeah, I’m back, and I’ve missed you guys so much.”

“Did you bring us presents from the Bahamas?” Jaspar asks.

“Uh, no. Sorry...”

“Aw!” the younger kids whine, and I swallow down a laugh.

“You two have enough toys as it is,” I say as I hug Emerald into me even more. “Plus, I think both of you promised me you’d tidy those rooms of yours before you got any more toys, okay?”

“Okay!” they chorus.

I pull Emerald with me as I fall onto the couch, and we watch the kids carry on with their homework as they chatter away.

And for the first time in a whole week, it doesn’t feel like the world is off kilter. Because with Emerald here, it feels like the whole world’s

fucking righted itself.

* * *

“Checkmate,” I declare with satisfaction.

Emerald groans. “I know I’m out of practice, but Jesus...”

I smile, righting the board as she sits back in her chair. “That’s three in a row. I think that counts as more than out of practice, Em.” She sticks her tongue out at me, but as she stands, I catch her hand, tugging her to me. “You don’t need to worry about Carmine.”

“What do you mean, Saint?”

“He’s dead.”

She blinks, and I feel her falter a little. I guide her to sit down on the edge of the bed beside me. “How? I mean, I thought he was too...”

I give her a shrug. “Turns out he wasn’t powerful enough to avoid judgment.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m going to tell you the truth about this even though my natural inclination is to lie to protect you. But I’m not going to lie to you anymore, Emerald. I found who was stealing the money from the casino to partner in a trafficking operation with the Croatians. It was Armando Barbieri, and I killed him. I don’t know how he managed to bury it so well, but he did. It took a while, but once I got on the right trail, I could finally see where the money was going. Christian gave me the go ahead to end him.”

“Okay. But I don’t get what that has to do with Carmine?”

“I planted evidence to make it look like he was also involved. And when I presented that to Christian, he gave me the go ahead to take out Carmine as well.”

She huffs out a breath. “You...did that for me?”

“*To keep you, the kids, and the baby safe.* A better man wouldn’t have done what I did, but I don’t want you to have any misconceptions about my role here.”

She’s silent for a long while.

I purse my lips. “Say something, Em.”

“So, I don’t have to worry?”

“No, Emerald, you don’t have to worry. The bounty is gone.”

“Okay... So, there’s no need to have another wedding,” she murmurs.

“Wedding?”

“I mean, because the wedding was really just so I would be protected by being your wife.”

I laugh softly. “I still want a wedding. Even after you ran out on me. And I intend to actually marry you this time.”

And she gives me a pleased look before a frown settles on her face.

“Are you okay, Emerald?”

“The Carmine thing is a lot to process.”

I tug her legs over my lap, my thumb brushing her thigh as she looks at me.

“It’s a relief to know he’s dead. That I don’t have to worry about my family or look over my shoulder. But...”

“But it’s still unsettling?” I say.

She nods.

“This is how these things work in our world, Em.”

“I know,” she says quietly.

I tug her a little closer. “But I don’t want to spend the night talking about a dead man.”

“Oh?”

“Seems like a waste of our time, Em.”

“A little.” She smiles at me, leaning in closer. “I love you, Saint.”

“I love you too, Em.”

She quirks an eyebrow. “Even with my reputation?”

“You have to stop beating yourself up about stuff, Em. Life isn’t black and white like a chessboard. There’s always going to be gray. Your mom was an escort, but she had her reasons, and it doesn’t mean that you’ll always be looked down upon. Even if people make comments, it’s your self-worth that matters, not their opinions. And also, it’s love that matters—my love and the love of your family—because I love you, and I always will.”

She slowly smiles at me, and I can see that she understands me, who I am, and what she means to me.

And as I look at her and realize that I have her and her beautiful beaming smile back in my life, the gray clouds smothering my chest slowly start to disperse.

After so long in the gloom, so long drowning, it finally feels like I’ve managed to capture a huge lungful of happiness.

And it's all because of Emerald...

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CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

EMERALD

“Where are we going, Saint?”

But he refuses to answer me.

I groan, slumping back against the seat. “You’re enjoying this.”

“Maybe a little.”

“Ugh!” I slap a hand over my face. “I swear, if we end up in some weird escape room or a surprise skydiving session, I will never forgive you.”

Saint quirks an eyebrow. “Aren’t I supposed to be the grumpy one?”

“I’m pregnant, so I’m allowed some slack.” I grin at him as I settle back in my seat, but I’m unable to completely shake the tiny spark of curiosity.

Arriving at our destination, I step out of the car, my heels clicking against the pavement. And I take in the sight before me. It’s the boutique where I was arrested—the one he had to buy to get the charges dropped. My heart dips a little as I see it. It’s not something I’m proud of, and I was actually hoping to be able to forget the whole situation as quickly as possible.

The boutique's elegant glass storefront gleams under the golden evening light, and soft music drifts out from within. I turn to Saint. He’s been acting unusually secretive all day, his eyes sparkling with some sort of mischief. “Why are we here?” I tilt my head as I look up at him. “I, er, don’t need another new dress, you know.”

Saint laces his fingers through mine as he leads me toward the entrance. “Trust me, Emerald. This is something special.”

He pushes open the door, and I step inside. The fresh smell of paint lingers in the air, and I can see that the place has been entirely refitted since my last time here. The boutique is breathtaking. Crystal chandeliers drip down from the ceiling, lighting up rows of stunning dresses. The racks of silk, lace, and chiffon create a sea of luxury, and a scent of roses and vanilla fills the air. But despite the boutique still being open and the staff milling around, we’re the only ones here.

And then suddenly—

“*Surprise!*”

A throng of voices rings out. And I startle out of my skin as a huge crowd of people rush out from the backroom and fill the space all around me. My eyes widen as I take in all the people. Jacquetta, Nicki, Milena, Jaspar, Giulietta, Christian, Leoluca, Quin, Christian's mom, my friends from the casino, and so many others. Their faces are glowing with excitement, and they have champagne flutes clutched in their hands.

I spin to Saint, my lips parting in shock. “What...what is this?”

He grins, his hands settling on my shoulders. “It’s a party to celebrate your new boutique.”

My breath catches. The words echo in my mind, but they don’t quite make sense. “*My boutique?*” I whisper.

He nods. “Yeah, yours.”

The world tilts slightly as the meaning of his words sinks in. My heart pounds against my ribs. “I know you bought the boutique so the charges would be dropped, but now you’re giving it to me?”

He shrugs. “I know how much you love clothes. So, yeah.”

Tears sting my eyes. I glance around, my vision blurring as I take in the familiar faces of everyone I love, standing here, celebrating my new boutique. The store shimmers around me, and for a moment, I feel like I’m in a dream. “You...you did this?” My voice wavers. “All of this?”

Saint chuckles softly. “Of course. You deserve this, Em. You deserve to have everything you’ve ever wanted.”

I shake my head, overwhelmed by the sheer generosity of the man standing before me.

Jacquetta steps forward. “He’s been working on this for you. We all have. We wanted to make sure it was perfect for you.” The kids are at her

side, babbling as they tell me how they had to keep it a secret and how they hope I like it.

Emotion swells in my throat. "I...I don't know what to say."

Saint smiles, his fingers tightening around mine. "Then don't say anything. Just enjoy it. Seeing that gorgeous smile of yours is enough for me...because it never fails to brighten my whole life."

A giggle escapes me, and before I can stop myself, I throw my arms around him, burying my face into his shoulder.

He holds me tightly, his warmth steadying me as I try to process what's happening.

When I finally pull back, I wipe at my damp cheeks and glance around. "So, let me get this straight..." I inhale a shaky breath. "This boutique belongs to me? I can design, stock, sell whatever I want?"

"Exactly," Saint confirms.

A delighted squeal erupts from Nicki as she rushes forward, hugging me tightly. "Oh my God, Em! You're going to have the most amazing boutique ever!"

In the corner of my eye, I see someone arriving late. And turning, I'm stunned to see that it's Ria.

She comes straight up to me and air-kisses me. "Congratulations, Emerald! Doesn't this place look amazing? I'm so pleased for you!"

I glare at her. "What on earth are you doing here, Ria?"

"I heard everyone talking about this event, and I decided to help you celebrate," she trills. "I'm sure my invite just got lost in the mail or something."

Jacquetta comes up behind us. "No, Ria, you just weren't invited."

Her jaw drops in disbelief. "But this party is the biggest event of the month! And I didn't want to miss out—"

"You need to leave, Ria," I tell her. "*Immediately.*"

"Wait! What? You can't mean that. You're not serious, surely?"

I stand up tall and look her in the eye. "I'm deadly serious."

Her voice becomes shrill. "But what will people think if they see me being *thrown out*?"

My gaze widens. "Have you already forgotten about when you called me a slut at my own wedding? And all the times you called me fat?"

She waves a dismissive hand in the air and gives one of her nasal laughs. "Oh, that was just a joke."

“A joke? It was supposed to be my wedding day, Ria. And as per usual, you chose to try and humiliate me.”

Her eyebrows shoot up before she looks down her nose at me. “I don’t think I like your attitude, Emerald.”

“*You don’t like my attitude?* Well, let me tell you, I haven’t liked your attitude *for years*. You bullied me at school and then continued with your nastiness afterward as well, using any opportunity to get a dig or insult in. What is actually wrong with you, Ria?”

“I, um, just thought...maybe we could start afresh,” she mutters in a weak voice.

“Because suddenly you’ve decided I’m *good enough* to be seen around? Because you want to be invited to my events? Because you want to be welcome at my boutique? I *never* did anything to you, Ria, and yet you continued to target me. I don’t know if it was down to jealousy, being insecure about yourself, or something else, but I do know that you give off a bad energy. And I don’t want someone as toxic as you anywhere near me, my family, or this boutique.”

“Toxic?” Her voice comes out as a splutter. And a tide of crimson rushes up her cheeks as she realizes that people are staring now.

But I just don’t care and carry on. “Yes, toxic. I can’t believe you have the nerve to turn up here and pretend like you never did anything to me.” I cross my arms in front of me. “*You need to leave. Right now. And from now on, don’t come anywhere near me or my family.*”

Ria looks like she wants the ground to swallow her up as she spins on her heel and stumbles out of the boutique. She looks completely embarrassed, but I had to stand up for myself. I had to let her know that her treatment of me isn’t in any way okay or acceptable. *And I’m proud of myself for finally doing it.*

The party carries on, and I’m so happy tonight. And I can’t believe the place I’m in now compared to just a few months ago. Even things with my mom have been getting better. Although rehab is a long and difficult journey, we’ve agreed she should have some supervised visits with the kids when she completes her latest stint. She’s determined to do better, and I want to be there to help her.

My family and friends gather around, their excitement infectious. A non-alcoholic version of champagne is passed into my hands, and I take a

sip, the bubbles tickling my throat. Laughter and chatter fill the boutique, and for the first time, I let the reality sink in. *This is mine. This is real.*

A sense of purpose and gratitude washes over me. And I make an instant decision that thirty percent of all the boutique's profits are going to be donated to the single moms' shelter every single month. I've received some good fortune in my life, and I'm determined to share it with as many people as I can.

I look at Saint, my heart swelling beyond measure. "I love you," I whisper, my voice thick with emotion.

His eyes soften, and he cups my face gently. "I love you too, Em."

And as the night unfolds, I find myself floating between conversations, hugs, and joyful tears. My hands trail over the dresses, my mind already brimming with ideas. I can already see the future laid out before me, and I know that I'm going to be spending it surrounded by the people I love and who love me back.

CHAPTER FIFTY

*E*MERALD

Saint has persuaded me to return to the Shoplifters Anonymous group, although I didn't take much convincing. I was ashamed of the onesie incident and then being arrested, so I missed a few meetings recently, but it's something I've been wanting to go back to.

I'm keen to return. Because I realize that this isn't something I can overcome by myself or that'll be a quick fix. Saint was right when he said I need the support of other people going through the same thing.

I'm also still doing my bookkeeping course. Even with the baby coming, I'm determined to keep on with it and get some qualifications in case something happens to the boutique one day. I need to have a proper fallback in life instead of just relying on a closetful of stolen dresses.

I know I'll have the income from the boutique now, plus Saint says he's wealthy enough that I'll never have to work, but I'm making sure that I've got a backup plan. The thought of having useful skills is making me worry less about running out of money, and hopefully, that will all help in my quest to stop stealing.

This evening, I'm back sitting in the circle with Amanda and the others. I keep the chessboard keychain gripped tightly in my fist, liking the reassuring feel of it as I listen. People are going around and telling their stories, and eventually, Amanda turns to Saint for his turn.

"Saint, do you feel ready to share your story with us today?"

“I, um...” His reply comes out in a stutter.

I’ve decided that if I’m going to come to these meetings, he’s coming with me—*because he definitely has more than a few issues*. I dig a sharp elbow into his ribs.

“Okay, okay,” he growls under his breath at me. “So, my name’s Saint, and...I, er, sometimes, steal, um, cereal...”

“Who do you steal them from?” Amanda asks, her brow slightly furrowed in confusion.

“From children,” I reply when he doesn’t say anything, leading to a shocked murmur rippling around the entire circle.

A deafening silence engulfs the room.

A woman slides her purse closer to her body and grabs onto it with a death grip.

Amanda starts clutching at her pearls.

And Saint shoots me a scowl.

Okay, maybe I wasn’t supposed to share that detail, but it just slipped out.

And then I can’t help myself as I proceed to recount the entire incident at the grocery store and Saint’s part in it as he continues to stare at me with an open mouth. I mean, he does steal cereal—and money and lives—so I’m hoping these sessions are going to be just as beneficial for him as they are for me.

“Oh my,” Amanda gasps, clapping a hand to her chest. “You really do need help, don’t you, Saint? But don’t worry, dear, we’re all in this journey with you, and we’ll be with you every step of the way.”

Saint starts to talk a bit about how his parents died when he was young and how he does a ‘few illegal things’ from time to time, and a couple of the others comment how their childhood also caused some of their issues. And I can see Saint really listening to them and taking in what they’re saying. Even though he’ll never say out loud the really bad things he does, I get the feeling that this group is the sort of non-judgmental place he needs to unload a few of his demons.

Later, when we leave the meeting, Saint turns to me. “About your little stunt in there—”

I interrupt him. “You’ve known all along that I’m a terrible liar. I had to answer Amanda when she asked that question. Because, you know, I couldn’t lie by omission.”

“I know me attending with you makes you feel more comfortable coming to these meetings, so I’ll support you in any way I can—even if it means that people will be thinking that I like to steal from kids.”

I send a glowing smile his way. “And that’s why I love you so much, Saint. Because you accept me just the way I am and because you always want to support me.”

He smiles back at me before giving me a long, deep kiss.

I sigh. “You know, Saint, there’s nothing sexier than a man who’ll go to a therapy group with me.” And as we slip into his car, I tell him to break the speed limit to get us home because I already have the rest of our night all planned out.

* * *

The following week, we’re having dinner when Saint slides a ring box across the table to me.

I frown. “What’s this?”

“Your engagement ring. I thought I’d get it cleaned for you before the wedding.” We’ve decided to finally tie the knot, but this wedding is going to be very different to the first one.

“So, that’s why I couldn’t find it this morning.” I take it out of the box and slip it onto my ring finger.

“By the way, I do know that this is a lab-created diamond worth only a *minuscule* fraction of what you charged on my Amex. And that the ring money and the poker money ended up in the pockets of a charity.”

I open my mouth and snap it shut. *Oh shit, I’m sooo bad at lying. I should have known I’d get found out.*

And he starts laughing—which is totally not the reaction I’m expecting, especially from a man like him. “You’re something else, you know that, Emerald Fiorelli? People might call you a gold digger, but I reckon the only shiny thing about you is your heart of gold.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I hardly have a heart of gold. I’ve got a history of stealing from other people, remember?”

“Okay, you have issues, but you also have a heart of gold *when it really counts*—like looking after your siblings when they need you and helping

other people too whenever the opportunity arises. And that's why I love you so very much..."

* * *

It's warmer here than I expected for this time of year, and it lends itself well to the blush off-the-shoulder dress I'm wearing. Some might say it's a pale gold color, but the tag definitely described it as *Bronzed Blush*.

It's nowhere near as traditional as the last wedding dress, but I've never been more thankful. That dress wasn't me. *It was some version of me I thought I needed to be.* But this dress? This one is all me. The sparkles, the short skirt, and the sassy bow. Although it's definitely not stolen—because Saint might just kill me if it was.

A small smile tugs at my lips. It's unorthodox, and I can already hear the gossipmongers back home talking up a storm about this—about me in my gold dress marrying Saint in an Elvis-themed Vegas chapel. But this is Saint and me. We're not the traditional kind of couple by any stretch of the imagination. It just felt right to have our wedding like this.

Heading inside the chapel in the heart of the Strip, we find Christian is already there with Jaspar. Christian's younger sister, Anni, has also come to Vegas for the wedding, and she has her big white fluffy cat tucked under her arm. Her husband, Lorenzo Marchiano, is nowhere to be seen. "Do you think Lorenzo has had enough of Anni's cat-crazy ways and decided to divorce her?" Jacquetta says to me with a giggle, and I can't help but grin.

"Not thinking of disappearing?" Saint asks me.

I look up at him as his arm circles around me, his hand resting on the slight mound of my stomach. "Well, now that you mention it, I heard someone say there was an all-you-can-eat nachos place nearby, and I think that sounds like a better use of my time..." I start giggling, and he laughs too.

This, right here. This feeling that's fizzing inside me is the sole reason I know this is going to work. This weird and messed up love story between this man and me is going to be just fine. "You're sure you're okay with this, Saint?"

He kisses my exposed shoulder and then my neck. "There's no better way I can think of to get married to you, Em, than in front of some guy

dressed up like Elvis. It's got *Emerald* written all over it."

I giggle as I squeeze his hands resting on my lower stomach. "Good. I couldn't go through another big wedding like the last one."

"Nor me." Saint kisses my cheek before stepping back. "Okay, ready?"

"More than ever."

He gives me a lingering look, and I see that solid shell of his melting away to give me a peek of that heart which is still mending beneath. This is the Saint I've come to know. The man who loves deeply. And without realizing it, a man who gives me a beautiful kind of love by accepting me just the way I am. I smile up at him. "I love that you see the real me. Not Emerald, the daughter of a thief. Not Emerald, the daughter of an escort. Not Emerald, the shoplifter. But just Emerald, plain and simple."

"No one could ever call you plain and simple," he says dryly.

And I laugh out loud. "But you know you wouldn't have it any other way."

"Absolutely."

Saint goes to stand at the head of the aisle. Jaspar bounces excitedly at his side in a little tux that matches Saint's. The music starts. Saint asked me to let him choose it, and I don't know what I was expecting, but when Elvis's *Can't Help Falling In Love* comes on, I feel tears well up. For a man who claims to be hopeless at the emotional stuff, he's done good. Real good.

Milena moves to stand in front of me with a smile as Giulietta scampers down the aisle and sprinkles pink glitter by the handful as she goes.

I wince just thinking about the cleanup. I tried to persuade her to scatter petals, but as soon as she wrinkled her cute little nose and demanded that she be allowed to sprinkle glitter, Saint immediately gave in to her and told the chapel he'd pay for the cleanup and give them a large extra sum on top of that.

Milena turns to me, a soft expression on her face. And it's one that smooths over some of the ongoing tension between us. "Ready, Em?"

"As I'll ever be."

She flashes me a small thumbs up before walking down the aisle, trying to avoid the puddles of pink glitter—Giulietta's gone overboard with how much of the stuff she's chucked over the floor.

With one last deep breath, I walk down the aisle, knowing everyone's eyes are on me. But my gaze is locked with Saint's, and his lips tug up as I

stand before him.

Elvis starts the ceremony by doing a hip swing, making everyone laugh. Saint's hand clasps mine, thumb brushing the back of my hand as I feel more tears. Happy tears.

Before the ceremony goes any further, Jasper makes Saint swear on the Bible that he won't steal any Lucky Charms from him ever again. This was the only way we could convince Jasper that this wedding was a good idea.

Saint raises his right hand. "I solemnly declare that I'll never steal a box of cereal from Jasper Fiorelli ever again, so help me God and Elvis."

Laughter ripples around the room, and Elvis gives a nod of approval.

Saint gives me a wink. "Can we get on now with the goddamn wedding?" he murmurs under his breath.

And I can't help a giggle. And unlike last time, I smile the entire ceremony, my eyes never straying from Saint's even when they blur with tears. For a coldhearted man, the way he talks to me during the vows, the way he speaks about me making him a better person and a better man, warms me in a way I haven't felt before.

"By the powers vested in me, it's time to get all shook up and lay a big ol' smooch on your hunka burnin' love! You may now kiss the bride!"

I laugh out loud as Saint cups my face, tugging me toward him and claiming my mouth. My fingers curl into his suit lapel as his body heat consumes me, and whistles and cheers from our small group of family and friends fill the space.

But all I can focus on is the way Saint's smoke and spice envelopes me. The way his lips feel against mine. The tender way he's holding me.

Every nerve, every cell and atom in my body, is alive and sparking.

And it's all because of him.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

S AINT

I press Emerald into the elevator wall as soon as the doors close. The smile on her face is a permanent fixture today, and I plan to keep it there for as long as I possibly can. Watching her walk toward me down that stupidly glittery aisle made my chest ache and body grow hard.

She's perfect.

Perfect and mine.

Her laugh fills the space as I press in closer. "Really? You can't wait a whole two minutes?"

"No, *not when it comes to my wife*," I growl. My lips drop to her jaw, her neck, skimming my nose along the column. I inhale the heady scent of her and let myself tumble over some metaphoric ledge to just get lost in her. This woman, *my wife*—that's a fucking trip every time the thought pops into my mind—is everything I never wanted but everything I needed.

I don't know what I did to deserve someone like Emerald in my life, but I'd have done it sooner if I knew this would be the outcome.

"Saint," Emerald laughs breathlessly, and the sound goes straight to my dick.

The elevator dings, and I don't waste any time before scooping her off the ground and into my arms. Five long strides later, and I'm swiping the keycard to the penthouse suite at the most expensive hotel in Vegas. Did I

need to splurge the way I have? No. But I don't really care as long as the bed's big enough.

I trap Emerald beneath me as the door closes. "Alone at fucking last."

She gives a glowing grin, looping her arms around my neck. "It's so convenient that Jacquetta offered to take the girls shopping and Christian is taking Jaspar to a movie."

"I think they know we'll be otherwise occupied for the foreseeable future."

Her grin grows, and I push her into the door a little more, my leg slotting between hers as my head dips, dropping my lips along her neck.

I pull back and look at her. *My wife.*

Fucking finally.

I brush the inky hair back from her face. "I love you, Emerald."

"I love you too."

"Good."

"Now just shut up and kiss me, Saint." And our mouths crash into each other in a crazed, desperate display of need and desire. I grip the back of her thighs, winding her legs around my waist as her fingers sink into my hair, our bodies working in unison to get as close as physically possible.

I carry her to the bed, laying her against its plush comforter. The thought of how Emerald feels around me, in my arms, the taste of her, has been distracting me all goddamn day.

I should have known that the moment Emerald sat in that car and thought I was a cop, I was a goner.

And I should have known she was going to be the best kind of trouble.

I pull back and nudge her nose with mine. "I plan to take my time with you, Emerald. So that you know just who you belong to."

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip, and she nods. Fuck me if it doesn't have me harder by the second. "Good. Because I plan on making sure you know who you belong to as well," she says in a husky voice.

Jesus. Christ. And all the fucking saints. This woman is going to make me come like some teenager before I even get the chance to sink inside her.

Her body writhes under me, desperately searching for something to dull the ache I know is building between her thighs.

My hand pulls the zipper at the back of her dress. And it's on the floor with one firm shuck.

My mouth waters. "Emerald..."

“Yeah?”

She has the goddamn audacity to play innocent when she’s laying beneath me in some barely-there lingerie set in white lace. *Fuck.*

“You had that on the whole time?”

“Yes,” she practically purrs.

“Expensive?”

“No.”

“*Stolen?*”

“No.”

“*Good.*” My hand cups her breast beneath the lace. I hear her moan as my thumb flicks over the nipple.

My fingers dip down between her breasts, over the intricate pattern of lace, over her belly, until I reach her legs. And I spread her thighs.

And grabbing at her thong, I smirk as I give a sharp pull until I hear the sound of the fabric ripping.

“You could have just taken it off,” she huffs.

“No, it’s more fun this way. Grab onto the headboard, baby. You’re gonna need it.”

I don’t give her a second to think before I dive in, hooking her legs over my shoulders. My tongue teases at her slick folds as I groan into her. Wet. Hot. Delicious. And all fucking mine.

A needy sound leaves her as my tongue runs over her seam, circling over her clit in just the way I know will make her see stars.

Her loud desperate moan fills the room.

My hands trail up the back of her thighs, sinking my fingers into the full curves of her ass as I suck her clit into my mouth and make her body buck into mine.

She’s writhing and moaning beneath me, shaking and trembling with need, and that stupid caveman part of my brain takes over.

As she pulls at my hair, a satisfied moan leaves me and vibrates through her, the feel of her nails dragging against my scalp just right as my dick juts hard against my pants.

And just when I think she’s going to come undone, I pull away and smirk again. The heavy-lidded look she gives me sends another thrill racing through my body.

I drag my finger along her wet slit as my eyes burn into her. And her lips part, and she gasps as I sink two fingers into her, sliding in further and

further until I hit that spot that drives her wild.

Her head falls back as she moans.

I pump my fingers in and out of her, my pace increasing as I move my mouth back over her.

In and out, my fingers move in time with my tongue.

She shakes and trembles.

I know she's on the cusp of coming.

Her fingers tug harder. She's wound up and whimpers my name. "Saint..." I can hear how she's panting as she tries to ride my fingers and tongue. "Saint...I'm gonna—"

But her words are cut off by her loud moan as she spasms and screams. Her body bucks and thrashes around my fingers. And I sit back, pulling my fingers free. And once I know her eyes are back on me, I suck my fingers into my mouth.

She whimpers again, and I stand at the edge of the bed. In no time at all, I'm bare before her. My dick hard and ready. "That's one, baby. Let's see how many we can get before the sun comes up, huh?"

Another low sound leaves her, but I see her grin. She's enjoying this as much as I am.

"Headboard. Grip it."

Languidly, she rolls over to her side before she gets to her knees. Hand reaching out to grip the upholstered headboard, her head bows against the pillows as she spreads her legs, trying to watch me as she does so.

And fuck me if that doesn't almost completely undo me.

I climb behind her, positioning myself just right. The mere glide through her slickness has me panting. Up and down, I rub my dick through her folds, taking extra time to circle her oversensitive clit.

She shudders, and I kiss her shoulder blade, pulling off the remains of the ruined lacy thong so that she's completely bare to me.

All mine.

She whimpers with need as my hands glide over her skin, memorizing the feel of every inch of it beneath my fingers. Taking my time. Teasing her. Kissing up her neck and jaw as I line myself up and sink into her in one hard thrust.

She moves with me, thrust for thrust, pushing back into me as her ass bounces against me. The angle lets me go even harder, deeper with each jerk of my hips.

I cup the perfect curve of her waist, fingers splaying just slightly over the small mound of her stomach. The noises she's making tell me I'm not going to last long at this rate. "You're mine, Emerald. I told you that before, and now I'm gonna prove it."

"Saint..." She's moaning, her head falling back against my shoulder.

"Let go of the bed, baby."

Satisfaction spreads through my chest when she immediately obeys and does as she's told.

The need to have as little space between us as possible pounds through me like a drum, and pulling her back into me, I run my tongue up the side of her neck, tasting the salty sheen of sweat on her skin.

One hand cups her breast. The other skims down the front of her to cup between her legs. Feeling how my dick moves in and out of her as she moves back against me, I stroke her clit with my finger.

Her entire body shakes and trembles, chest heaving with ragged pants. "It's...too much, Saint. I can't..."

"I know, baby, but you're going to take it," I growl. My finger slowly teases her clit, controlled and deliberate. I can feel that she's almost there, and I'm right there with her. Her head tilts to the side, her mouth moving toward mine. Her hips buck and grind before her eyes roll into the back of her head. I crash my mouth into hers as she screams. Her inner walls squeezing me so tight that I never stood a fucking chance.

I moan as I spill my thick seed into her. Like fire spreading through my entire body, consuming and engulfing, the waves of pleasure suffocate me until there's nothing left except the sound of our panting.

"That was..." My head falls to her shoulder to place a soft kiss.

"Yeah." She laughs softly, her body turning around in my arms. "Yeah, it was."

We stay locked together for a moment before I ease from her. But the whimper she gives has me getting hard again already. Fuck, she's going to kill me before the night is out.

"I hear the showers are pretty spacious in this suite," she says with a sly smile.

"I like the way you think, Mrs. Veneti."

"Mmm, I like the sound of that."

"Good. Because I'm gonna say it at least a hundred more times tonight."

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EPILOGUE

EMERALD

I shift on the couch, trying to find some relief from the ache in my back. The all too familiar stab of pain I've felt all day squeezes once more. It's annoying but manageable. It's just a false alarm. That's all. It's nothing to get worked up over.

The memory of my first panic a few weeks ago pops into my mind. When the hospital had informed us that it was just Braxton Hicks, I'd been mortified when Saint held a gun to the doctor's head until he checked a second time. I'd apologized profusely to the staff, but they reassured us that it happens a lot with first time pregnant moms—well, the Braxton Hicks thing does, but not the gun to the head thing.

I try to distract myself with something else and start to wonder how Jacquetta is doing. I wince as I think about her wedding just a short while ago which ended up with her being jilted at the altar. But that wasn't the worst of it—because all the other things that happened after that were utterly horrific. I shudder just thinking about it all, and I resolve to call her later today to check in and see how she's doing. She had the world at her feet. Brains, unrivaled beauty, and an impeccable background from being the Capo's niece. I still don't understand how it all went so wrong for her.

My eyes flicker to the clock on the wall in the den. The kids should be home soon, and then we'll be off to have dinner in celebration of Saint's birthday.

He told us we didn't need to do anything, but how could we not? A rook-shaped cake—a demand from Jaspar because of the chess connection—sits in the fridge for after we get back from the steakhouse for dinner.

Another stab of pain hits me, and I bite my lip, noting for the fifth time how closer they seem to be, my breath a shallow pant as I ride the wave of it out.

I push up from the couch as I hear the door open.

“Em?”

“In the den!” Taking one step, then another, I feel something low in my stomach and a warmth between my legs. My body freezes. My eyes drift down in disbelief at the puddle on the floor. “Saint!”

Nothing.

“Saint!” I call again, a little more frantically.

His body fills the doorway, his brow pulled down in concern. “What’s wrong?”

I look down at the puddle again, then lift my eyes to him. “I think my water just broke...”

“What? Now?” Saint stares at me, and I stare back, reality seeming to sink into both of us at the same time. “Fuck,” he murmurs.

“Yeah, fuck,” I agree.

“Do...I mean...” He shakes his head quickly to clear his panic, and I watch that calm and collected mask fall into place. “Alright. Can you walk?”

“I think so.”

“Perfect. Just remember that breathing.”

My lip twitches because he might seem calm and unruffled on the outside, but there’s that spark in his eyes. The one that tells me he’s anything but. He’s freaking out, and I relish the look just a few seconds longer before taking a small step forward.

“This is it. You’re doing great already.”

“Saint.”

“Yeah, Em?”

“I’m just walking. I don’t need a pep talk yet. Just take a breath and grab the bag. I’ll have Jacquetta bring the kids once we get to the hospital.”

“Right. Yeah. That’s what I was going to say.”

“Uh-huh.” I reach where he’s standing, and I look up at him. “Thank you.”

“For?”

“For trying to hold it together. Because you freaking out will only make me freak out more.”

He breathes out and drags a hand down his face. “Noted, but I’m reserving for later the right to really freak out.”

Another contraction surges through me, and I gasp at the pain, breathing through my mouth with a sharp hiss. The thought that this is real, this is happening, sinks in.

Our baby is coming, and there’s no going back.

Saint’s hand presses into my lower back as he ushers me toward the door. “Ready, Em?”

“I think it’s too late for that question.”

And his laugh is a deep warmth that soothes some of the nervousness that’s building inside of me as we slowly make it to the car.

* * *

My hair sticks to my temples as I pant. My knuckles are white from where I clutch Saint’s hand, and all I want to do is scream, cry, and sleep. But it’s the shrill cry that has my heart lodged in my throat. Saint’s lips press to my temple as he murmurs something I don’t quite hear.

And my chest is still heaving as I lift it slightly from the bed, my entire focus on the perfect little baby the nurses are gently swaddling.

“Did you folks pick out a name?”

I shake my head. “Not yet.”

Without knowing the gender, we decided to just focus on the other stuff. Like fixing up one of the spare rooms as a nursery, getting all the essentials, and going to prenatal classes. Picking out a name felt so important that I decided we needed to meet the baby before bestowing some name like Bambi or Buster on it forever.

“We’ll just call her Baby Girl Veneti for now,” the nurse replies.

“A girl?” It’s the first thing I’ve heard Saint manage to say since the baby came out.

The nurse smiles. “Yeah, a girl.”

And a sound of satisfaction leaves me as I watch Saint tentatively and carefully cradle our baby in his arms as if she were as precious as the rarest

gem. The look on his face is so open and so raw that my heart does a flip just at the sight of it.

"She's perfect," he murmurs. His voice is thick. And then I see a tear roll down his cheek, followed by another and another.

And I'm totally floored.

He gives me a smile through the tears. "This is the first time I've cried since..." His voice drifts off.

"I know," I whisper. It's the first time he's cried since his parents' funeral. I put my hand on his arm and smile up at him. "You were saving it for something special."

He keeps on looking down at our baby girl with wonder in his gaze.

"Can I?" I ask, reaching out for her. With the utmost care, Saint and I make the swap, and I feel a beaming smile on my face as I look down at the fragile little angel in my arms. And the tightness in my chest is not born of anything but something raw and wonderful. *Happiness. Contentment. Love.*

Saint kisses my temple again, and I look up at him. "Not really the birthday present I had in mind, but it's the best present I've ever had," he says, laughing through his tears.

And in that instant, I decide. "Liliana."

"What?"

"Her name. It's Liliana."

Saint hums and nods. "A beautiful name for a beautiful little girl." Then he's quiet for a few long moments.

"Saint?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you...okay?"

He laughs, kissing my temple yet again as he nods. "I'm perfect, Em. She's the best present I could have asked for. It's a new way to look at my birthday. Something special...instead of something broken and damaged."

I lean into him a little.

"That was my wish that day, Em."

My brow furrows. "Huh?"

"When you made me make a wish before blowing out the birthday candles on the ice cream."

"You mean the day we first met? When I thought you were a cop?"

"Yeah. I wished...that my birthday would stop being so painful. That I could stop being sad every year for the months running up to that date. I

should have guessed that you would be the one to make that happen. Because from now on, my birthday is going to remind me of the most special day of my life—when I first held our beautiful baby daughter in my arms.” We watch as the baby’s teeny tiny fingers wrap around his finger. “You know, before I wasn’t really sure if wishes could come true. *But now I know that they definitely can...*”

I swallow around the lump in my throat.

“I was always cold and didn’t allow emotions. But that day, when you wanted me to have a birthday wish, it made me crack a little... You saying such a small thing shouldn’t have mattered to me, but it did. Because no one bothered about my birthday when I was young since it was the anniversary of my parents’ murder.”

I give his hand a squeeze.

“I can’t believe how far we’ve come since that day, Em. I mean, you in that stolen dress—”

“You lying that you were a cop—”

“Me running after you down the sidewalk—”

“You *chasing* after me because you couldn’t just admit how attracted you were to me—”

And we both burst out laughing. “Ours wasn’t a conventional meeting, but it sure as hell was one wild ride,” Saint whispers. “Because you, Emerald Veneti, always give as good as you get.”

I smile back at him, and we sit there, just staring down at our baby girl before the nurse wheels her away with the parting words to get some sleep. I can feel the exhaustion in my bones. Saint carefully reclines back onto the bed beside me, and I lean into his chest.

“I know this doesn’t erase what happened to you, Saint, but I’m glad you’re taking this as a new start.”

Saint’s fingers drift through my hair, and he sighs. “I didn’t think I’d ever see a day like this, Em. I didn’t think I *deserved* it. Today is something beautiful, like a miracle. But one look at Liliana, and it’s like the past is now just a faded memory which doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter?”

“I mean, it matters, obviously. But I don’t think my mom or dad would have wanted me to think of anything other than what’s here today.”

I squeeze his hand. “I think you’re right,” I say softly.

“It doesn’t mean I’m forgetting them or what happened. It just means that maybe today doesn’t have to be something sad. How can it be when it’s the day our baby girl was brought into our lives?”

I smile at him. “I’m glad, Saint, really. You deserve to celebrate your birthday and be happy.”

“I’m happy, Em. I really am. And that hollow spot in my chest, the one that’s been aching and hurting for over two decades, is slowly starting to fill. It’s filling with bright, glorious, radiant sunshine. *And that’s all because of you, Emerald. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.*”

* * *

TWO YEARS LATER

Saint is still just like the man I first met, but at the same time, he’s also very different. For one thing, he lies a heck of a lot less. Plus, he lets himself show his emotions more—he even cried again the first time Lili called him Dadda. And he’s carried on coming to the support group with me, and I can tell that it really helps him. He still enjoys killing way too much, but, hey, nobody’s perfect.

I haven’t stolen again since the onesie incident. The group says it’s an issue I might have to deal with for the rest of my life, but the most important thing is to keep working at it and not let myself spiral out of control again.

For my part, I’m loving being a mom and taking care of the kids. I’m working part time at the boutique and doing the accounts at home while I look after Lili. It has really helped my self-esteem, knowing that I’m capable of these things and knowing I have a way to support us if things ever go south again. Everything I’ve learned from my bookkeeping course is getting put to great use in the boutique, and buying all the expensive stock for the business fulfills some of that high I used to get from when I got my hands on all those beautiful dresses I stole.

I even paid back every single store I ever stole from, sending them a check for double the dress cost and interest, plus a letter of sincere apology.

I know my letters and checks don't absolve me from my wrongdoings in any way, but at least I was able to let them know that I was genuinely sorry.

I still have to pinch myself at times to believe how far I've come. "You're kicking ass, Em," Saint tells me. "You already were before I met you, and you'll keep on doing it. You're a force to be reckoned with, and I knew that the first time I met you."

Liliana sits on Saint's lap, looking in awe at the mountain of presents that have somehow made it to the table in front of us. We expressly told everyone just a few gifts. And as per normal, they chose to have selective hearing about that.

I watch as our little girl snuggles into Saint's chest and looks up adoringly at him, as ever a daddy's little girl.

There's leftover frosting from her smash cake on her outfit. Explaining the purpose of that to Saint took a whole week, but I think he realized its purpose about two seconds before she pummeled her tiny fists into it, smearing frosting all over his cheek and nose. It was such a success that Jaspar is demanding one for his next birthday.

"What?" Saint asks as he catches me staring at him.

"You've got that look on your face."

"What look is that?"

"You know, Saint, that dopey grin."

"I'm just...happy." And he squeezes my hand before bringing the back of it to his lips.

"Me too, Saint. And from the giggles, I would say Lili is as well."

"Happy birthday, Lili!" Jaspar and Giulietta squeal for about the twentieth time. They've been so excited in the run up to Lili's second birthday.

Saint's rumble of laughter, not such a rare thing to hear lately, fills the space as he pulls them into him as they plant kisses on Lili's cheeks. My gaze bounces around the room at the smiling faces of our friends and family.

"Open mine first!" Giulietta says, pulling her present out of the pile.

"No, mine!" Jaspar argues. I can already tell by its shape what he's chosen for her—a stuffed crocodile.

"How about both of them?" Milena suggests.

Jaspar giggles. "At the same time? That's just silly."

"Then how about we let Liliana pick?" I suggest.

The kids nod as they coo and fawn over the little girl who's soaking up all the attention from them. They're always so affectionate and protective of her, and I love this unconventional family unit we've become.

After the presents have been opened, we all move into the kitchen, and I smile as I look down at the second cake. A homemade masterpiece created by the kids and me.

With a quick flick of Saint's Zippo lighter, the candles on the cake are all lit and glowing in the darkened room.

And everyone begins to sing happy birthday. Not just to Liliana but to Saint as well. Because over the last two years, we've made it a new Veneti tradition to celebrate both their birthdays together.

Saint holds my gaze as I take my seat beside him. "Make sure you make a good wish," I say softly to him.

"But tell nobody about it!" Jaspar warns.

"Or it won't come true," Giulietta adds.

Saint nods, that smirk on his face making an appearance and still causing as many butterflies in my stomach as it did the first time I met him.

With a dramatic pause, Saint and Lili blow out the candles together to a round of applause and cheers.

"Happy birthday," I say, kissing his cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too, Em." He turns to look down at Lili in his lap. "And I love Lili and the kids." He gives a big, genuine smile. "Because this is *my* family now—it's *our* family."

* * *

After hours of laughter, conversation, and cake, I stretch out on the bed, feeling the exhaustion from the day pulling me under.

Saint slips into the bed beside me, pulling me onto his chest. "You know, Em, I'm super proud of you for still going to the group."

I smile up at him. "And I'm glad that you're still coming to the group as well. I can tell that it helps you with your stuff as much as it helps me." My OCD has much improved, and that's something I'm happy about. It can still flare up if I get stressed, but the CBT has been really helpful for managing it.

His lips brush against my shoulder, and he lets out a small sigh.

“Good birthday?” I ask in a drowsy voice.

“The best so far.” He reaches down and kisses my neck.

I smile and turn to face him. “Did you really have a good day?”

“Yeah, I did. It was perfect. That was my wish...that everything will just stay perfect like this. I don’t know what I did to get this kind of life, but I’m damn glad it happened. You. Lili. Jaspar, Giulietta, and Milena.” He is silent for a few moments, and when he speaks again, his voice is quieter. “For the first time since I was five years old, I have what I’ve always wanted and always needed. Because you guys are it for me.”

“We were meant for each other, Saint.”

“Yeah, we were, Em.” He kisses my forehead, and I press closer.

“I’m just glad we get to give Lili a better upbringing than my siblings got.” I still shudder a little when I think about the lack of stability and what they went through with our parents and in the years before I married Saint.

“Em, you’ve done great with them. You’ve given them what they needed. *Love*. They have what every kid needs.”

“I know but...”

“But nothing. Trust me, as someone who missed that in his childhood, it made it fucking hard to recognize love when it finally happened to me. None of your siblings are going to have that problem. What you’ve done for those kids is amazing, and they are beyond lucky to have you as their sister.

I caress my fingers over the side of his jaw. “You know, Saint, you’re not so bad at this love thing now,” I tell him.

“You’re just being nice because it’s still my birthday. We both know I was—am—fucked up. I almost missed out on being with the one person who was meant for me. I didn’t have an example of what love was supposed to look like. But now I see it every day when I’m here with you and our family. I love you, Em.”

“I love you too, Saint.”

“Good, because you’re stuck with me until death do us part.”

I laugh as I snuggle into him.

“I love this feeling when I’m with you, Em,” he murmurs.

“This feeling?”

“It’s like you’re perfection.”

“Perfection?” I huff softly in a disbelieving tone. “Hardly...”

“Emerald Veneti, every damn bit of you—the gold dresses, the chess, the sunshine smiles, all of it—is goddamn perfection.”

“My dresses are *not* gold,” I giggle. I still have a thing for shiny and sparkly dresses, but now I always pay for them.

“I don’t know if I realized it when I first met you, Em, but you’re everything I need in my life. *Because you’re my favorite addiction—and you’ll be that forever.*”

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Already missing Saint and Emerald? For a **BONUS EPILOGUE** (which includes a snapshot of their family a few years later), please see here:

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